

# ORANGE COUNTY

**Crackdown Victims Face Eviction With No Place to Go**

## Tenants Despair at Loan Decision

By G. M. BUSH, Times Staff Writer

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The ramshackle, one-bedroom apartment where the Martinez family lives is one of three units in what was originally a single-family house in central Santa Ana.

At some time unknown to either city officials or the building's current owners, the dwelling was divided in violation of the housing code, and more tenants moved in.

Olga Martinez, her husband and six children have lived in the dilapidated apartment for about 18 months, paying \$290 per month in rent. Martinez said she knows the house is in poor condition, but she doesn't think she can find another place to live for the same amount.

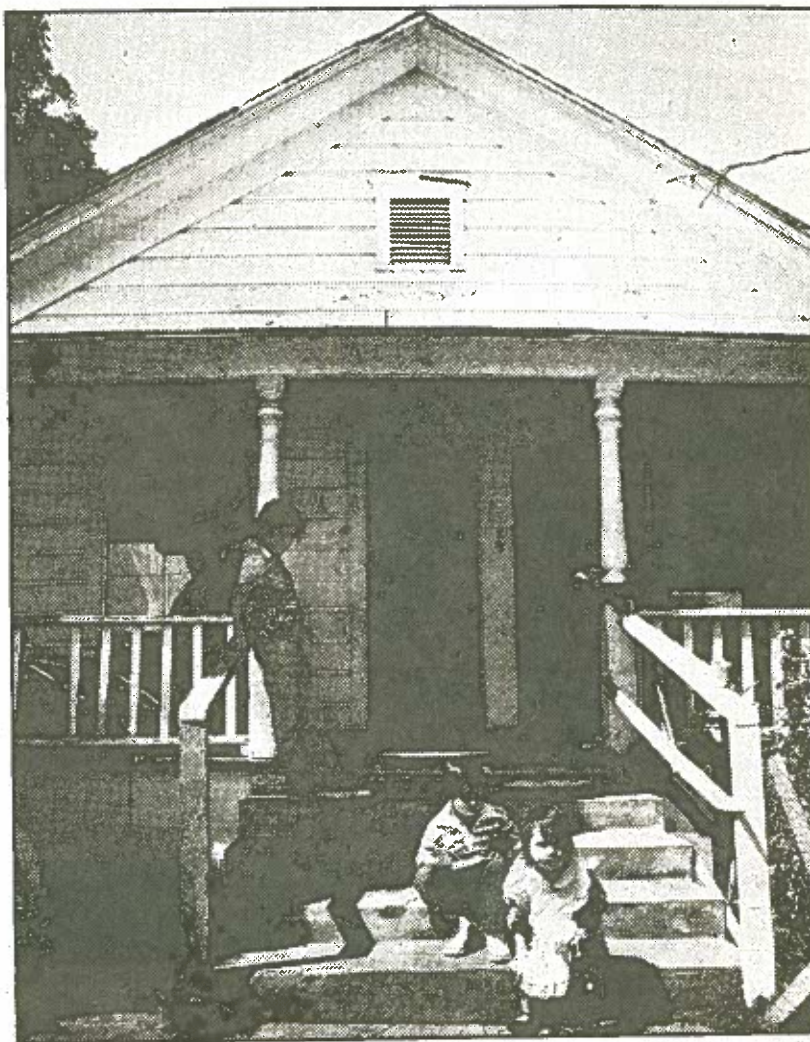
### House Found Unsafe

On April 5, three days after the city officially began a stepped-up campaign against housing code violators, the Martinez home was one of those visited by inspectors. The entire house was found unsafe and ordered vacated by June 5.

Martinez said she didn't know what to do but had been holding out hope that the city—which was forcing her family to move—would at least help them to move. She said a housing inspector had told her that the city might be in the position to provide assistance, and she hoped that would happen.

Then, on Monday, the Santa Ana City Council decided not to establish a \$100,000 loan fund that would have helped defray moving costs for poor tenants like the Martinezes. The action came as a blow to Martinez and to many others who

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The children of Olga Martinez may not understand but the family has been ordered by the city to leave the substandard home.

# Residents Face Eviction With No Place to Move

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view the crackdown on housing code violators as an undeclared war on poor, largely Latino tenants.

People like Olga Martinez and her family, council critics claim, have become refugees in the city where they live, work, go to school and pay taxes.

"Code enforcement is potentially devastating to low-income families," said Becky Esparza, vice chairwoman of the Orange County Human Relations Commission. She said the \$100,000 loan fund "was a small effort to mitigate the problem created by (the crackdown)."

Jean Forbath, commission chairwoman and president of a Costa Mesa-based community organization called Share Our Selves (SOS), said she was "very, very disappointed" by the City Council vote.

"The only thing we as a civilized society can do," she said, "is to try to do what we can to help others." The City Council's refusal to go along with the loan proposal is an abrogation of that duty, she said, describing the decision as "sad and short-sighted."

## No Money in Bank

Speaking of families like the Martinezes, Forbath said, "I don't know where they will go. They can come here (to SOS) and we can help them a little, but the resources of Santa Ana would have been a big help."

On Tuesday, Olga Martinez said she has no idea where the family will go. There is no money in the bank, she said, and bills and other living expenses quickly eat up the meager earnings of the one family member who works. Isabel Villegas, an elderly woman who is one of six people living in the next apartment, is also affected by the order to vacate the property. She said she doesn't believe the city would kick an old woman and children into the street and added that her landlord told her that they could probably stay for another six or seven months.

Housing inspector Javier Rivera said he, too, has heard that certain property owners are making such promises to tenants, "either trying to collect another month's rent or hoping the appeals process will buy them some time," he said.

But for tenants, he said, the sad truth is that the appeals process—as drawn out and lengthy as it can often be—has nothing to do with an order to vacate an unsafe dwelling.

Isabel Villegas' daughter, Trinidad, and her husband also live in the apartment, but neither of them work. A son, Ignacio, works, but only earns \$160 every eight days, his mother said.

"We are worried, very very worried, but we don't know what to do," Trinidad Villegas said.

The tenants said they feel they have done nothing wrong but are victims of a system in which they have little to say. They note that they have consistently paid their rent on time. They said calls to the landlord to repair faulty electrical wiring or non-working plumbing fixtures have been in vain. "We called and told him about the problems. He said he would send a man out to fix things, but no one ever comes," Trinidad Villegas said.

## The Landlord Never Came

Unlike many apartments in the rundown buildings, the Villegas home was neat and tidy, bordering on the immaculate. Isabel Villegas pointed out the broken



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Isabel Villegas is facing eviction from her home.

bathroom door and the sink hanging loosely from the wall. "We told the landlord," she said, "but he never came."

What happens if the families have not moved by June 5, the date of the eviction? George Gragg, the city's community preservation officer in charge of housing code enforcement, said that once a notice is posted, occupying the building is a misdemeanor. "But," he said, "we try to work as closely as we can with the tenants." However, "when it comes down to the wire, we can issue a citation to the tenants. It's a matter of their own protection," he added.

Martha Ramirez, president of the large amalgamation of citizens groups known as Santa Ana Neighborhood Organization, said that by its vote against the loan proposal, the city "has allowed speculators and slumlords to take advantage of the tenants."

She noted that the federal funds requested in the proposal are intended by the federal government to be used for low-income housing. "That money is there to be used; why can't they make the loans?" she asked angrily. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "I hope the people who are evicted camp outside the homes of the councilmen who voted against the proposal."