

**Written Testimony of Lauren Godles  
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**Committee on the Environment, Public Works, and Transportation  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Hearing on B20-569, The Air Pollution Disclosure and Reduction Act of 2013**

**January 2, 2014**

My name is Lauren Godles, and I am a Legal Assistant with the Housing Unit at the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia. I welcome this opportunity to offer testimony regarding issues with mold that I have observed during my time at Legal Aid.

I have worked at Legal Aid since July 2012. In my capacity as a Legal Assistant in the Housing Unit, I perform housing inspections at client homes all over the city. At the homes, I take photos and write written reports about unsanitary or unsafe conditions and potential violations of the housing code. I also have testified in D.C. Superior Court as to the housing conditions I have observed. I have performed over 150 housing inspections during my time as a legal assistant.

Far too often, I see mold in clients' homes and speak with clients about their health concerns regarding the mold. The clients represented by Legal Aid's Housing Unit are low-income tenants who cannot afford expensive treatments for these serious issues. If the landlord refuses to bring in a professional assessment company, our clients cannot afford to fix the problems themselves, nor do they have the option of simply moving away. Our clients are individuals living in poverty who struggle to maintain housing and secure access to health care. Moreover, since mold is not explicitly addressed in the D.C. Housing Code, clients sometimes tell me that city inspectors will not cite for mold.

My testimony today focuses on the prevalence of mold in low-income rental housing in DC. I will outline for the Council my experiences with mold in our clients' homes. I will also illustrate the negative consequences of mold by sharing some client stories where mold has caused serious health concerns. In order to preserve the privacy of these clients, their names have been changed, as well as some of the details about their background and household composition.

**Mold Growth in Low-income Rental Housing is Prevalent and Unsanitary**

During my time performing housing inspections in low-income rental housing across the District of Columbia, I have seen an unsettling amount of mold growth in the homes of tenants. In order to share the variety and severity of these experiences with the Council, I have attached photos of some clients' homes to this testimony. These photographs only scratch the surface of this widespread problem.

As the Council can see from these photographs of client homes, indoor mold growth is widespread and renders entire areas of tenants' homes unsanitary. The bathroom is the room I have most often seen covered in mold. Too often, tenants' bathrooms, as depicted in the photos I have provided, contain large, sprawling growths. In Photos A-D, taken at the homes of Legal Aid clients, the mold can be seen covering the walls of a shower, bathroom sink, and bathtub in different clients' homes. Photo A shows a dire situation in which the mold has thrived on the tiles of the shower walls and extended all the way down to the walls and basin of the tub. For all tenants, and especially for tenants who are elderly, have children, or have health conditions like asthma, it is unacceptable to have to bathe in such conditions.

In addition to large patches of mold in bathrooms, I have frequently seen mold growths in areas of homes that have been affected by flooding. In one building, which houses four separate families, raw sewage repeatedly flooded the entire basement. In addition to suffering the foul smells coming from the refuse, these four families were forced to deal with persistent mold in the aftermath of the floods. The walls in the basement had mold that grew several feet high (as shown in Photo E), and the mold also permeated the units upstairs. The odor was unbearable, and because the landlord refused to remediate the mold, it affected the families long after the leak had been fixed.

As a result of flooding and water damage, I have also seen mold growth on clients' closets (Photo F), windows sills (Photo G), clothing, walls, ceilings, and more. The Council should work to ensure that tenants are entitled to full remediation of problems resulting from flooding, including the mold that can linger long after the flood has ceased.

### **Mold Causes Serious Health Concerns for Our Clients**

In addition to fostering unsanitary environments for tenants, mold also causes serious health concerns for them and their families. The following anecdotes illustrate examples of the consequences of mold for low-income tenants in the District.

Several months ago, I went to do an inspection for Mr. Williams. Mr. Williams lives in a one-bedroom apartment with his small son, George. This summer, Mr. William's apartment flooded with water, and the landlord left the soaked carpet in the apartment for almost a week. After two days in the damp apartment, George, who had always been healthy, began having difficulty breathing. Mr. Williams had no choice but to remove him from the home and seek temporary shelter. Even after the carpet was replaced and the pair returned home, the smell persisted, and mold growths appeared. A week later, both Mr. Williams and George became violently ill, and Mr. Williams had to take his son to the doctor to get antibiotics for his respiratory problems. Though Mr. Williams has complained to his landlord about the smell and the mold in his apartment, management still insists it can be fixed with bleach and water. Mr. Williams has tried this approach, but the mold always comes back.

Similarly, Ms. Baker was a client living in an apartment that was plagued by mold for six years. Persistent leaks from the roof of the building caused mold to flourish in her home. In 2006, the first major outbreak of mold occurred on the ceiling, as shown in Photo H. The landlord temporarily fixed the issue, only for it to resurface in full force in 2008, and again in

2012. That year, the leak became so bad that the entire ceiling collapsed, and the mold continued to grow. At the time, Ms. Baker was in school and working two jobs. She did not have access to medical insurance and worried about the cost of getting sick from the mold. Ms. Baker asked her landlord to have a professional mold report done on the unit, but he refused. She then contacted the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA), which sent an inspector to the unit twice. Unfortunately though, the inspector told Ms. Baker that DCRA inspectors are not authorized to cite for mold.

Due to her fears about potential illness and medical costs associated with the mold, Ms. Baker left her unsanitary apartment and moved in with her mother. If a mold inspector had been contracted and able to determine whether or not there was any risk from the growths in the apartment, and what steps were needed for remediation, Ms. Baker could have stayed in the unit. However, because DCRA would not cite for the mold, it was difficult to persuade the landlord to effectively remediate Ms. Baker's apartment. Consequently, she felt she had no further recourse but to abandon the place she called home for eighteen years.

Tenants are not the only ones who fear the harmful effects of mold. In the case of Ms. Turner, the mold in her home hindered the completion of other necessary repairs. Ms. Turner was living in a home with multiple housing code violations, and the landlord ignored all of Ms. Turner's requests for repairs. Legal Aid subsequently helped Ms. Turner to file a Housing Conditions Case to compel the landlord to fix the unit. After we filed the case, the landlord finally hired a contractor who began work in the apartment, but promptly stopped when he realized there were patches of mold. He did not feel it was safe to work in a unit with mold growth. Since the Court felt it was not authorized to order repairs for mold, we had trouble obtaining an order regarding remediation, and the case reached an impasse. Ms. Turner was prevented from obtaining timely, critical improvements to her home due to fears about the mold.

While only expert investigators can determine the level of risk posed by any specific mold growth, we do know that mold *is capable* of causing severe health problems. For this reason, tenants need access to professionals who can assess the risk and help them decide if their home is safe for them and their families. Moreover, if the homes are not safe, judges need to be able to enforce orders that will compel the proper remediation.

## **Conclusion**

Tenants—low-income tenants in particular—suffer too often in this city from the effects of mold growths in their homes. Even more problematic is the fact that they have little recourse to combat this problem. For the reasons I have outlined above, mold is far too prevalent and detrimental to tenants in this city for our current policies on mold to continue. We need comprehensive legislation that ensures the health and safety all residents and their families.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Council.



**PHOTO A**



**PHOTO B**



**PHOTO C**



**PHOTO D**



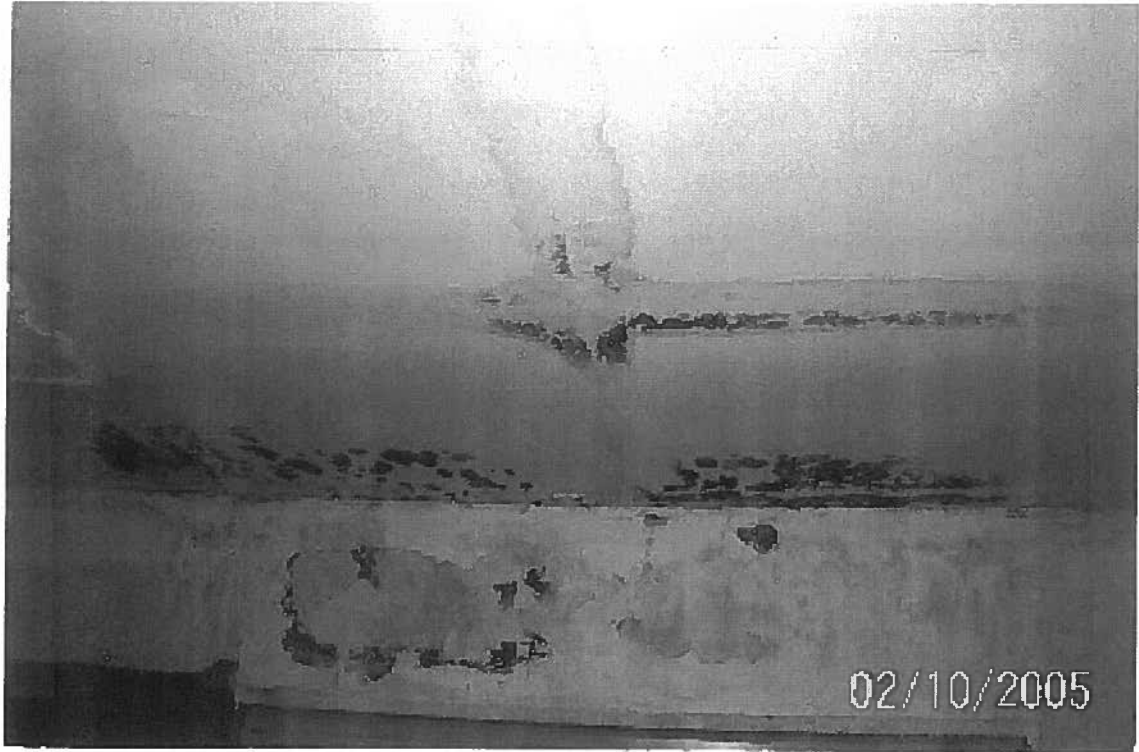
**PHOTO E**



**PHOTO F**



**PHOTO G**



**PHOTO H**