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Father and son accused of being Dallas' 'most prolific slumlords' are evicting tenants from 305 houses

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Written by: [Robert Wilonsky, City Columnist](#)

Hanna Khraish and son Khraish Khraish are either Dallas' most generous provider of affordable housing or "[the most prolific slumlords in Dallas County](#)." Depends on whether you ask them or their tenants.

Maybe it doesn't matter anymore: The pair's company, HMK Ltd., is apparently getting out of the low-rent business. For now, anyway.

That's good news for city officials who've been trying to get HMK to fix its tumbledown rent houses for years. It's bad news for tenants who've been paying around \$500 a month to live in one of HMK's over 300 rent homes.

Almost every person living in an HMK rent house, including a lot of families with little kids, will have to get gone by no later than Halloween. That's one hell of a trick.

Mayor Mike Rawlings said Tuesday the city would try to help those tenants losing their homes.

"Our office will do everything we can to ensure that HMK tenants are not put out on the streets," he said in a statement.

Best I can tell, HMK is blaming the Dallas City Council because it had the audacity last week to approve new rules that will allow code inspectors into rent houses for the first time ever.

What gall — wanting to make sure houses are habitable.

The city puts the blame squarely on the Khraishes.

"HMK's mass evictions will likely cause many of its tenants to suffer serious hardships because they may not be able to find suitable alternative housing on such short notice," says a statement from the city attorney's office. "Regardless, HMK would not need to close so many dwellings had it properly maintained them."

I tried to get a response from the Khraishes. But Hanna wasn't in when I called HMK's Singleton Boulevard offices this week, and his son was always in a meeting and unavailable. The only

person I could reach was their adviser, John Carney, who was out of the country but still had plenty to say about how the city does business so long as we kept it off the record.

Here's what we do know: On Sept. 20, HMK sent a letter to the city's director of code compliance and the county's top health official notifying them that 305 rent houses — most in West Dallas, in the shadow of Trinity Groves — are officially off the market. The letter says HMK's giving "notice of closure" effective immediately. Since leases are month-to-month, Oct. 31 is the latest clear-by date.

Says the missive, after those 305 properties are vacated the landlord "will either immediately demolish the rental unit or no longer use the unit for residential purposes." Which is language straight out of state law governing the relationship between a landlord and a tenant and what happens when a renter's given the boot.

That doesn't mean HMK's out of the rent-house business for good. The company owns, and plans to continue leasing, more than 100 other low-rent homes in Dallas, according to the city attorney.

As for the homes the Khraishes plan to empty, [the section of Texas Property Code HMK cites in its letter to the city and county](#) says only that "the landlord may not allow reoccupancy or reconnection of utilities by separate meter within six months after the date the tenant moves out." So maybe this is just a time-out for HMK, which has managed for years to successfully fend off code citations filed in muni court.

"It was never the intent of the city to have people lose their houses," said Kris Sweckard, Dallas' director of code compliance. "Our intent was to have minimum housing standards enforced across the city."

The city attorney's office got the letter two weeks ago — just before the council voted to toughen up housing standards and require code inspections of single-family rental homes for the first time in the city's history. The council, which struggled with the do-over for many months, hailed the rewrite as a major victory.

This has been Mayor Mike Rawlings' crusade for some time: Last year, he introduced the so-called High Impact Landlord Initiative, which identified individuals and companies who owned over 40 single-family housing rental properties across Dallas. The city put eight names on the list, with HMK at the very top with around 440 properties — most of which are valued around \$10,000 to \$20,000, according to the Dallas Central Appraisal District.

Rawlings' office called all eight and asked them to sign a "commitment card" that said the landlords would register all their properties and let city inspectors inside to give them a thorough



Joanna Pena and daughter Zaory Rendon, 4, sit on the stoop of their West Dallas home, which the owners, HMK, say they'll need to vacate no later than Oct. 31. (Ashley Landis/Staff Photographer)



Three houses on Nomas Street in west Dallas, all owned by HMK. (Louis Deluca/Staff Photographer)

once-over. The mayor's spokesman said Tuesday that HMK never signed the commitment card.

Only one other landlord refused to sign the card: Dennis Topletz, whom City Hall sued last November when it tried to take control of some 190 properties city attorneys deemed "dilapidated and often crime-ridden." The Topletzes fought back by insisting it was a government land-grab.

The city kept its hands off HMK, which WFAA-TV (Channel 8) called "[the city's largest junk landlord](#)" back in March, except in municipal court, where, [records show](#), most cases filed in recent years have been kicked out due to "insufficient evidence" or findings of not guilty.

The city did file five urban-nuisance suits against HMK this summer in municipal court. Four tenants were relocated to other properties, after which HMK demolished their dilapidated homes. When a fifth tenant refused to move, the city said, HMK made necessary repairs.

But last month, two tenants, Joanna Pena and Sergio Rendon, did what the city wouldn't — sued HMK in Dallas County court for being a slumlord that forces residents to endure "unspeakably squalid conditions," according to the petition whose allegations the Khraishes vehemently dispute.

Pena said Monday that HMK has sent her three notices to vacate in recent weeks. She got the first one in mid-September. She remembers the day exactly: "I was in the hospital, giving birth to my son."

I didn't set out to interview Pena this week. She happened to be the only HMK tenant who opened up when I went knocking on doors Monday in the Los Altos neighborhood near Singleton and Sylvan Avenue. She said her neighbors don't want to talk, that they're scared of a constable showing up with eviction notices. Better to suffer in silence, in squalor, than be homeless altogether. One of her neighbors, Pena said, is a single mom with a young child. She's terrified of what's about to happen.

So's Pena, who was home Monday evening with her 2- and 4-year-old daughters, Bella and Zaory. At first I couldn't tell — the front windows are spray-painted. Pena, who has lived in this rickety shotgun house for six years, said that's to keep the sun out. Mother and girls were in the front room, lying on a grimy bare mattress in front of a window unit struggling to keep the dimly lit room cool. The baby was in the back, asleep.

Worst case, she said, she and her husband and the kids stay with friends for a while. But she said other friends in HMK houses — some "worse than mine," she said — aren't so lucky. She asked them to join her lawsuit. They refused.

"They think they're going to get kicked out right then and there," Pena said. "I told them to stand up for yourself. Enough is enough. It's got to stop."

The city attorney's office urges tenants of HMK who have received a notice of closure and want to talk in English or Spanish about their situation to call City Code Inspector Eloisa Mariscal at 214-952-8466.