

Housing Authority finally pays \$3.2 million to fire victims' relatives

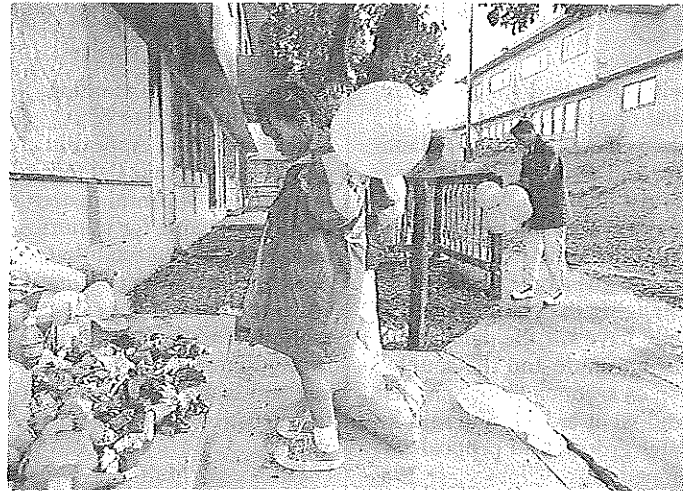
By Heather Knight
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Eleven years after a fire ripped through an apartment in a Hunters Point public housing development and killed a grandmother and five children, the San Francisco Housing Authority has paid off the multimillion-dollar judgment owed to the victims' relatives.

The long saga involved numerous court hearings, the threat of jail time for the housing authority's former director and the appointment of a former mayor to get the judgments paid. It ended Thursday when the agency's new director walked into a Pine Street law office and handed over a check for \$3.2 million.

"It's a new day at the San Francisco Housing Authority," said Henry Alvarez, hired last summer by Mayor Gavin Newsom with instructions to resolve the issue. "We want to avoid looking back other than for the historical nature of what not to do. We want to look forward."

The deadly fire occurred Dec. 13, 1997 in a Hunters View apartment, killing Delores Evans, 42; her two grandchildren, Markeisha Joseph, 3, and Ziyadeh Latef, 7 months; and two nieces, Raquel Shelton, 6, and Donnisha Shelton, 4. Valerie Redmond, the 8-year-old



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle 1997

Looking over the memorial for fire victims in 1997 are (from left) Katrina Benjamin, Kevina Moore and Pam Jackson, who had been a longtime friend of victim Delores Evans.

daughter of Evans' boyfriend, was also killed.

The Housing Authority was found negligent for not installing a smoke detector or fixing a faulty heater in the unit and was ordered to pay the victims' families \$12 million. The agency was also ordered to pay two other judgments in unrelated sexual harassment cases from the late 1990s. By November 2007, the total money the agency owed, with interest, was \$18.1 million.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which funds the agency, prohibited it from using federal money to pay the

judgments. But two San Francisco Superior Court judges threatened to jail former Housing Authority Director Gregg Fortner if he didn't pay the money.

Former Mayor Art Agnos was eventually tapped by a judge to become receiver of the agency. That seemed to jolt City Hall into action. Agnos never took control of the agency; instead, Newsom fired Fortner and appointed Mirian Saez, director of operations at Treasure Island, to run the agency on an interim basis before hiring Alvarez. Under Saez and then Alvarez, the agency sold off properties to satisfy the judgments.

"We sold everything that wasn't tied down," Alvarez said.

The agency sold a parking lot at the Alice Griffith development at Candlestick Point for \$5.8 million to the city's Redevelopment Agency. It also sold extra property at the Rosa Parks development in the Western Addition for \$4.95 million to Citizens Housing Corp. to build 100 affordable units for seniors. Smaller properties around the city were also sold, including one in Bernal Heights and another in Ingleside.

Jereon Brown, deputy assistant secretary for HUD, said the federal agency worked with the local housing authority to figure out a creative way to get the judgments paid without allowing services to low-income residents to suffer. "In our minds, this is the best of both worlds," he said.

Tom Brandi, attorney for the plaintiffs, did not return calls for comment.

Agnos said he was glad he never had to take on the job of receiver. He credited the judges for their "dramatic actions" and the families' lawyers who he called "extraordinary advocates for these clients who were poor and powerless against a very large government institution."

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