SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE REPORT: THE PRICE OF BEING POOR

How San Francisco Rewards Corporate Landlords Who Neglect Its Most Vulnerable Residents with Multi-Million Dollar Contracts

THE JOHN STEWART COMPANY

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They called it affordable housing. Tenants describe something closer to abandonment: sewage backups, boarded windows, unsafe buildings, and a system that punishes those who complain.

After months of reporting, this investigation asks why City Hall continues rewarding the very companies accused of failing San Francisco's most vulnerable residents.

By Malik Washington
Destination Freedom Media Group | The Davis Vanguard

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SAN FRANCISCO — The ceiling didn't just crack.
It collapsed.

On April 21, 66-year-old Annette McClendon was sitting in the community room at the Alice Griffith housing complex in Bayview–Hunters Point watching a youth art show. Children laughed as families gathered around tables displaying paintings and handmade crafts. For a brief moment, joy filled a community that fights for every scrap of stability.

Then came the crash.

A massive slab of fiberglass ceiling tile tore loose from above and slammed into Ms. McClendon's neck, covering her in dust, debris, and stagnant water that had been pooling overhead for weeks. What had been a celebration instantly turned into a triage scene as neighbors rushed to help.

The ceiling didn't just crack. It collapsed.
This did not happen in a neglected century-old building.

It happened inside a development constructed in 2017 — a modern affordable housing complex managed by the John Stewart Company, the largest affordable housing manager in California.

And it happened while the City of San Francisco continues awarding that same company — and others like Related California — millions of dollars in public contracts to build and manage housing for the city's poorest residents.

This investigation uncovers a systemic pattern: in San Francisco, poverty has become a business model.

Corporate landlords collect millions in public funds while residents report hazardous living conditions and deteriorating infrastructure. Meanwhile City Hall insists its authority to intervene is limited — even as the contracts continue flowing.

If you are poor in California, there is a strong chance your housing is managed by the John Stewart Company.

Founded in 1978, the firm now oversees 283 properties statewide, including 41 developments in San Francisco alone. Thousands of families, seniors, and disabled residents depend on the company for safe and stable housing.

But inspection reports and tenant complaints paint a troubling picture.

At Alice Griffith Apartments, where Ms. McClendon was injured, the San Francisco Housing Authority documented more than 129 deficiencies in a single year. Inspectors reported broken elevators, electrical hazards, pest infestations, and plumbing failures severe enough to send sewage backing into bathtubs.

For residents living on upper floors, broken elevators are not merely inconvenient — they can trap people inside their homes.

In one case cited by tenant complaints, a disabled resident reported being trapped inside his apartment for nine days when elevators stopped functioning. Eventually he slid down the stairwell on his body simply to reach the outside world.
Across San Francisco, similar complaints have surfaced.

At Plaza East in the Western Addition, tenants filed a lawsuit alleging harassment and unsafe living conditions.

At Treasure Island, residents raised concerns about attempted unauthorized entries into apartments and violations of tenant rights.

Investigative reporting later found that after privatization, complaints at properties managed by the John Stewart Company rose sharply.

Yet the contracts keep coming.

While the John Stewart Company manages many of the buildings, Related California often builds them.

Related California is part of Related Companies, the global real-estate empire founded by billionaire Stephen M. Ross, whose development portfolio spans luxury towers, stadium projects, and large-scale housing complexes valued between $60 billion and $100 billion in assets.

In San Francisco's Hunters Point neighborhood, Related manages more than 600 federally subsidized housing units across several developments.

Residents who temporarily relocated during renovations expected to return to improved homes.

Instead, some reported apartments with missing windows covered in plywood, appliances that sparked or malfunctioned upon first use, and faulty doors that locked residents inside their own homes, requiring intervention from firefighters.
In one case, a pregnant resident had to be rescued by the fire department after becoming trapped inside her apartment.

Another family reported that movers hired during relocation discarded their teenage daughter's bed and mattress, forcing the 15-year-old to sleep on the floor.

City inspectors later confirmed the presence of asbestos hazards within some of the units.

Dennis Williams Jr., executive director of the Fillmore Community Development Corporation, summarized the contradiction bluntly:

“Our families are living with asbestos and toxic conditions while Related California continues to receive billion-dollar city contracts.”

The most disturbing element of this story is not the broken elevators or collapsing ceilings.....***It is the City’s response***.

Following the January 15, 2026 State of the City address, I asked Mayor Daniel Lurie whether San Francisco intended to hold housing operators accountable.

The mayor said the City has limited authority over private property management companies.

Yet the City’s own financial decisions suggest otherwise.

Recent approvals include a $45.1 million housing project at Treasure Island, development contracts tied to the Sunnydale HOPE SF redevelopment, and more than $13 million in loans and grants directed toward improvements at properties already facing serious tenant complaints.

While claiming “no authority,” the city continues to award multi-million-dollar contracts to the very companies accused of neglecting the residents they are paid to house.

The City isn’t powerless. It is complicit.

District 10 Supervisor Shamann Walton has been among the few city officials publicly demanding accountability.

On April 9, 2025, Walton issued a statement calling for immediate action regarding conditions at Alice Griffith Apartments. At public hearings he pressed executives to explain why management fees continued while residents reported broken elevators and unresolved maintenance problems.

His position challenges the narrative that City Hall lacks authority.

When political pressure is applied, housing companies often respond quickly.
The State of California has already shown what accountability can look like.

On June 12, 2025, California Attorney General Rob Bonta filed a sweeping lawsuit against PAMA Management and landlord Mike Nijjar alleging widespread habitability violations and deceptive leasing practices.

The lawsuit argued that some corporate landlords treat tenant lawsuits as simply the cost of doing business.

The conditions described at Alice Griffith, Plaza East, and Hunters Point mirror many of the allegations raised in that complaint.

The legal pathway exists.
The evidence exists.

What remains uncertain is whether San Francisco officials are willing to act.
Over several months reporting this investigation, I spoke with tenants, advocates, and community organizers across Bayview–Hunters Point and other neighborhoods dominated by privatized affordable housing developments.

What emerged from those conversations was not only a pattern of deteriorating conditions.

It was a pattern of fear.

Several tenants described what they believe are retaliatory responses when residents complain or attempt to organize fellow tenants.

One individual repeatedly mentioned in those accounts is Christopher Jones, a regional manager overseeing several Related California properties in Hunters Point.

According to information recently shared with this reporter, at least one tenant claims to possess documentation they believe demonstrates unethical or unprofessional conduct during interactions with residents and has indicated a willingness to release that evidence publicly.

Those allegations have not been adjudicated.
But their seriousness underscores the need for independent oversight.

As part of this investigation, I raised these concerns directly with Mayor Daniel Lurie, urging the administration to devote resources toward examining complaints residents have lodged against corporate landlords receiving public funding.

The responsibility for enforcement also lies with the Office of the City Attorney.

City Attorney David Chiu has the legal authority to investigate housing violations and pursue enforcement actions. Yet some community leaders say confidence in that office has eroded.

Several advocates within San Francisco's Black community argue the City Attorney's office has shown greater urgency when investigating African American nonprofit operators than when addressing allegations involving large private corporations doing business with the city.

Whether that perception proves justified or not, it reflects deep frustration among residents who believe their grievances have not been taken seriously.

The privatization of public housing through initiatives such as HOPE SF was promoted as a solution.

Private developers would build modern housing. Private managers would maintain it efficiently.

Instead, many residents say the result has been something very different.
Since privatization began, complaints and code violations have risen sharply across converted housing developments.

Some former residents of the old Double Rock public housing complex have said they preferred their older units to the new developments they describe as fragile ***"cardboard buildings."***

Which leads to a simple question.
If the tenants are suffering, the buildings are crumbling, and the city is paying millions — who is this system actually serving?

Because the system clearly serves someone.
It serves corporate shareholders.
It serves property management executives.
It serves the financial machinery of privatized housing.
But for the families living inside these buildings, it too often delivers something far less secure.

A roof that may collapse.

And a government that has not yet decided whether protecting its most vulnerable residents matters more than protecting the contracts that house them.

Honoring the Behind-the-Scenes Women who are Freedom Fighters for Their Community

Nearly one year ago San Francisco District 10 Supervisor Shamann Walton issued a warning and raised the alarm regarding the horrendous conditions his constituents were being forced to live under. Tim Redmond from 48 Hills and Marina Newman of Mission Local amplified Walton's concerns. Once again, I want to be crystal clear so that every resident and taxpayer in the City of San Francisco understands my point. Private corporate landlords in the City and County of San Francisco have been running amuck

with no checks and balances. This is not isolated to Bayview/HuntersPoint or District 10; this is happening all over the City. District 5 Supervisor, Bilal Mahmood has remained silent, and District 6 Supervisor, Matt Dorsey has not done much better. There is a pattern of conduct and behavior that exists here. I have met a group of strong, intelligent, and powerful women of color who have quietly battled in silence against these violators of the public's trust. Although I cannot mention them by name for fear of retaliation from the corporate slumlords, I state for the record that with this article and many more that will follow, I honor their commitment, dedication and sacrifice for their communities. If you are reading this article, I humbly request that you share it far and wide and do not look away. Very soon, you will see that my concerns are extremely valid.

Conditions at a Hunters Point housing project are disgraceful—and the private operators are ducking responsibility - 48 hills
https://share.google/zLfCnxBoqfGVwf51O

Bayview residents, S.F. supervisor slam public housing conditions
https://share.google/mglQs4wUSo4n4vr6o

RESOURCE LIST

Primary Source Documents

1.) San Francisco Board of Supervisors Resolution r0264-25
2.) San Francisco Ethics Commission Contract Approval Notice
3.) Supervisor Shamann Walton Press Release
4.) California Attorney General Press Release – PAMA Lawsuit
5.) People of the State of California v. Mike Nijjar et al.
6.) Mayor’s Office Housing Funding Announcement

Investigative Journalism

7.) Mission Local – Alice Griffith inspection failures
8.) Mission Local – Plaza East tenant lawsuit
9.) Mission Local – Alice Griffith construction problems
10.) San Francisco Bay View – Hunters Point renovation failures
11.) SF Public Press – Public Housing in Private Hands investigation
12.) San Francisco Examiner – Affordable housing tenant complaints
13.) Davis Vanguard – Malik Washington investigative reporting

Corporate Data

14.) Related California corporate profile
15.) Related Companies portfolio data
16.) John Stewart Company corporate history

Legal & Policy Sources

17.) HUD housing discrimination settlement
18.) California DOJ complaint in Nijjar/PAMA case
19.) Personal interview with Mayor Daniel Lurie conducted by Malik Washington

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malik Washington is an investigative journalist and co-founder of Destination Freedom Media Group, an independent nonprofit newsroom dedicated to accountability reporting at the intersection of civil rights, public integrity, disability justice, structural accountability within American institutions, and community survival. He has been a published journalist for over 14 years.

His work—published in partnership with the Davis Vanguard—focuses on government power, criminal justice, environmental justice, and the human consequences of policy decisions too often insulated from public scrutiny. Washington's reporting amplifies the voices of impacted communities while insisting on documentary evidence, transparency, and the unvarnished truth—especially when institutions demand silence.

His work appears on platforms such as Muck Rack and Black Voice News, examining the intersection of justice, governance, and community.

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