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A long night's wait for affordable housing in Columbia Heights

By [Annie Gowen](#), Published: November 29th, 2011

Hundreds of low-income area residents waited in line overnight Monday into Tuesday in Columbia Heights, hoping for the chance to rent an affordable apartment in a recently renovated complex.

The line outside the doors of Hubbard Place apartments formed in the darkness just after 6 p.m. Monday and stretched nearly three city blocks by the next morning, as residents vied for one of 100 coveted spots on the complex's waiting list. About 10 units become available in the federally subsidized 230-unit complex in a given year.

The complex's D.C.-based developer, Somerset Development, said the response was unexpected but showed the city's continued demand for affordable housing. The need is especially acute in neighborhoods such as rapidly gentrifying Columbia Heights, with its new bars and restaurants and busy Target store.

"I expected a long line, I really did . . . but waiting overnight? That is over the top. It was very unexpected," said Nancy Hooff, a principal with Somerset.

As a chilly rain descended, those waiting huddled under blankets, umbrellas and ponchos made from trash bags. They squatted on stools and sat in lawn chairs. Mothers swaddled their children in fleece blankets.

Competition for the possible apartments at Hubbard Place was intense. Security guards and two D.C. police officers tried to keep the line orderly, but shouting matches broke out, and some of those who had waited accused others of cutting in line and not waiting their turn.

"There are a lot of people that need housing, a lot of homeless right now," said Katherine Felder, a security guard who had been waiting in line since midnight. She lost her apartment this year and has been staying with relatives, along with two granddaughters, ages 3 and 2, who are in her care.

"I don't have anywhere to stay," she said from under a black umbrella, shifting her weight to keep warm. "I'm cold, wet and soaked to the bone, soaked from my head to my toes. Cold, cold, cold. Haven't slept all night."

Those in line dreamed that they would one day be able to live in one of the apartments at Hubbard Place, renovated in 2009 for the city's low-income residents with shiny new appliances, a computer center and an after-school program for children.

The District lost a third of its low-cost rental units from 2000 to 2007, at the height of the housing boom, [according to a 2010 study by the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute](#). Many dwellings that have been built since are for upper-income brackets. Meanwhile, rents continue to increase.

(Special report: [Million-Dollar Wasteland, an ongoing investigation into HUD's affordable housing construction program](#).)

"Housing costs are rising so rapidly here, and they're really outpacing the incomes," said Jenny Reed, a policy analyst at the institute. Median rent in the city rose by more than a third in the past decade, but incomes did not keep pace, Reed said.

Unemployment rates in some of the poorer areas east of the Anacostia River are more than twice the national average, and the city's homeless population rose 14 percent in the downturn, according to the annual homeless census conducted by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

Many low-income residents spend months or even years on the city's waiting list of 20,000 for public housing units or federal housing vouchers.

At the end of the long night and a longer cold morning, Felder and her daughter, Myosha, a community college student, made it to the front of the line and walked away with applications. They said they hoped they might get a chance at an apartment early next year.

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http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-long-nights-wait-for-affordable-housing/2011/11/29/gIQAFbDKAO_story.html