

# A search for safety and for a new start

Tenants say lawsuit provides best hope of better housing

By TOM BOWMAN  
SUN STAFF

Rhonda Harris expected better.

Raised in a churchgoing working-class family in northern Anne Arundel County, the 25-year-old woman thought she'd be married with her own home, or at least a nice apartment. Maybe she'd be working as a hairdresser.

Soon her thoughts are brought back to this cramped living room at the McCulloh Homes, a tired collection of brick and chain link on Preston Street in West Baltimore.

Ms. Harris is one of six plaintiffs in a lawsuit filed earlier this year by the American Civil Liberties Union against the city. She and the others are seeking a court-ordered escape from the segregated pockets of poverty for thousands of public housing residents.

With the lawsuit nearing settlement, the families hope to take their public assistance and move to white, middle class areas in Baltimore and the suburbs. And a better life.

The bleakness of Ms. Harris' home is tempered by the decals — Santas, reindeers, dolls and presents — that pepper her windows under a paper sign: "Happy Holidays." A plastic Christmas tree is set in the corner. Her three children, ranging in age from 3 to 7, watch cartoon videos and munch animal crackers. Each has a different father.

Ms. Harris would like to head back to Anne Arundel County, perhaps to the Pasadena area where her mother lives and where she often takes her children to play in Lake Waterford Park.

"I never thought I would live in public housing," she says, curled up on one edge



HILLERY SMITH: SUN STAFF

**Suing:** Rhonda Harris is one of six plaintiffs seeking a court-ordered escape from segregated pockets of poverty.

of a brown corduroy sofa, with her arms folded. "I was very naive, believing things guys told me, like they wanted to marry me — the junk that guys tell girls."

Working as a receptionist in a city government office and trying to earn her high school equivalency certificate, she is an unlikely catalyst for a burgeoning controversy that has swept up Baltimore, the surrounding counties and the federal bureaucracy in Washington.

"They should have a

choice. They shouldn't put people someplace like this and expect them to be happy," she says, recalling the police foot chases, gunshots and killings that are a nightly backdrop. She was shocked when she saw a map that detailed how the city's public housing is clustered in the poorest areas.

She glances at her children. "I'm afraid to let them play here. If they're outside it's because I'm with them."

Now Ms. Harris and her children (See Tenants, 6B)

# Public housing tenants say lawsuit is best hope

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have become mere digits in a political game. Baltimore County Executive C. A. Dutch Ruppertsberger III firmly opposed the proposal and was successful in shaving the number of poor families destined for the county and spreading out the moves over six years. Other county executives aren't sure of their particular share, they say. Talks continue between county attorneys and officials from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington.

"It's very much up in the air," says Malissa Ruffner, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, which represents the tenants. "It seems to change on a daily basis."

Before taking part, families will receive counseling that will help them identify housing that suits their needs — in terms of transportation, schools and employ-

ment. Under the plan's guidelines, Ms. Harris would be among the top half of those considered for a move, since they were relocated from high-rise public housing complexes.

Shifting black public housing tenants to the suburbs is not new.

Twenty years ago, a Chicago desegregation lawsuit enabled more than 5,500 public-housing families to move to nonsegregated areas of Chicago and to 130 suburbs. The plan resulted in higher incomes for the families involved and sharply lower dropout rates among their children, studies have shown.

Ms. Harris says she understands how many would be opposed to hundreds of poor families moving into more affluent parts of the city and counties. "I guess they figure if you're in public housing you're dirty and your house is dirty," she says. "Not everyone is like that. I'm one."

Doris Tinsley, 42, a single moth-

er of five, with the three youngest at home, is another of the six plaintiffs. She lives in public assisted housing on Forrest Street, an area of poverty and violence that abuts the Baltimore jail. "What [opponents are] saying is, 'Yeah you live in poverty. You don't deserve to be out in the county with people like us.'"

Still, Ms. Tinsley, who helped clean up trash and push out drug dealers with the neighborhood group Johnston Square Positive Force, can empathize with the more affluent citizens.

"I think they should be concerned to a certain degree. If I worked for years to build up a nice home, I wouldn't want property values to go down and stuff like that," she says. "Then again I feel, give me a chance to build something too."

One of seven children of a tight-knit family from a working-class neighborhood off Waverly Avenue, Ms. Tinsley had a good-paying as-

sembly-line job and was married to an Army enlisted man. But the marriage dissolved and she developed health problems. She ended up in public housing, first at Lexington Terrace off Fayette Street and then on this street the neighbors nicknamed "Prison Row."

Ms. Tinsley would like to move north into Baltimore County or west to Columbia, areas where there are trees and better schools for her children. She wants a home where the night air is not punctured by angry shouts and gunfire.

"I don't want to get away from the transportation line," she says, hoping she can one day find another assembly-line job.

Ms. Tinsley and Ms. Harris are uncertain if they will ever receive any benefit from the lawsuit. Both say they hope the legal action will help others in their situation.

"We stick together because we're fighting for the same thing," Ms. Tinsley says of the plaintiffs. "It's not for myself. It's for people like me who want better things out of life, to contribute to society instead of getting a handout from society."