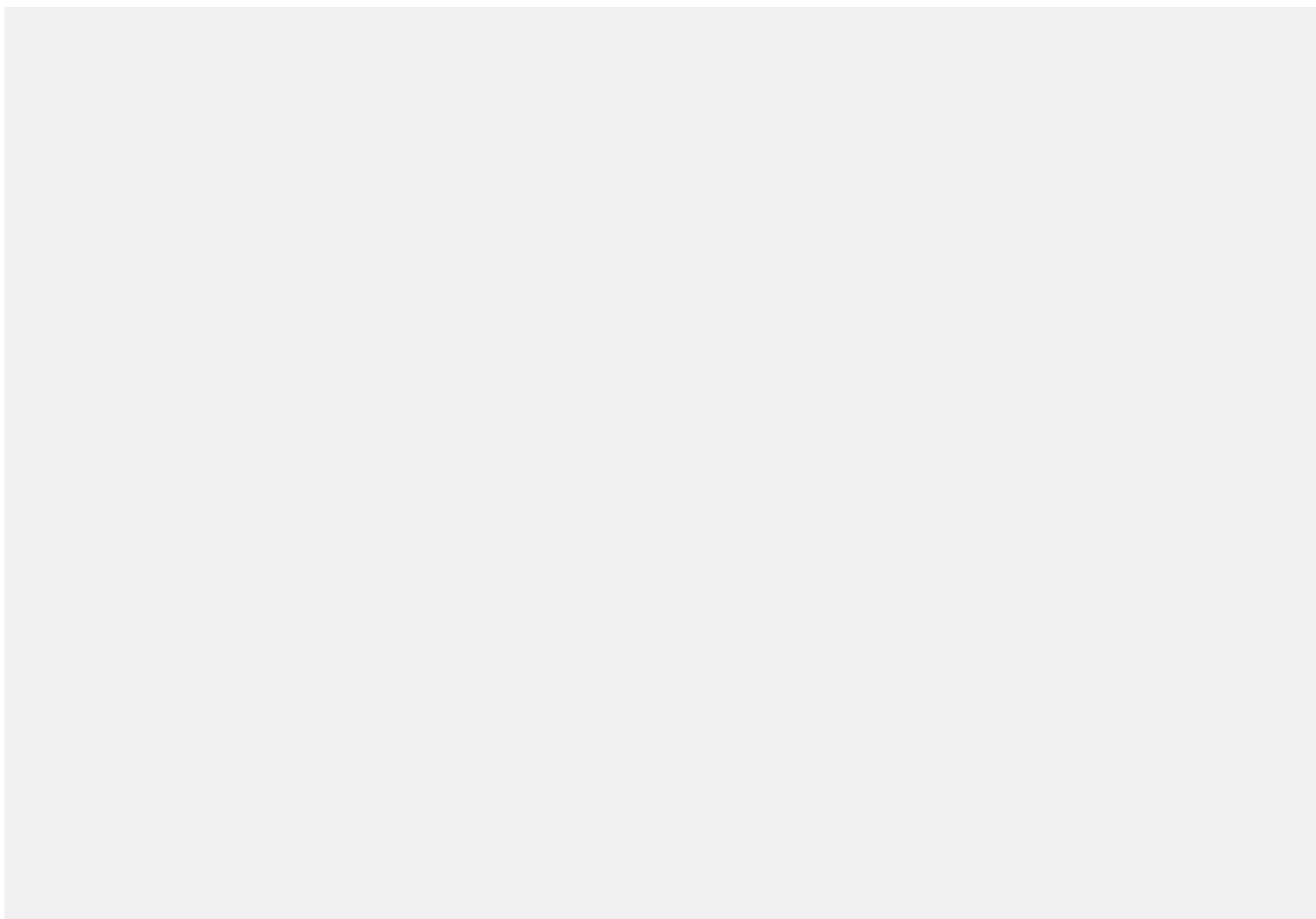


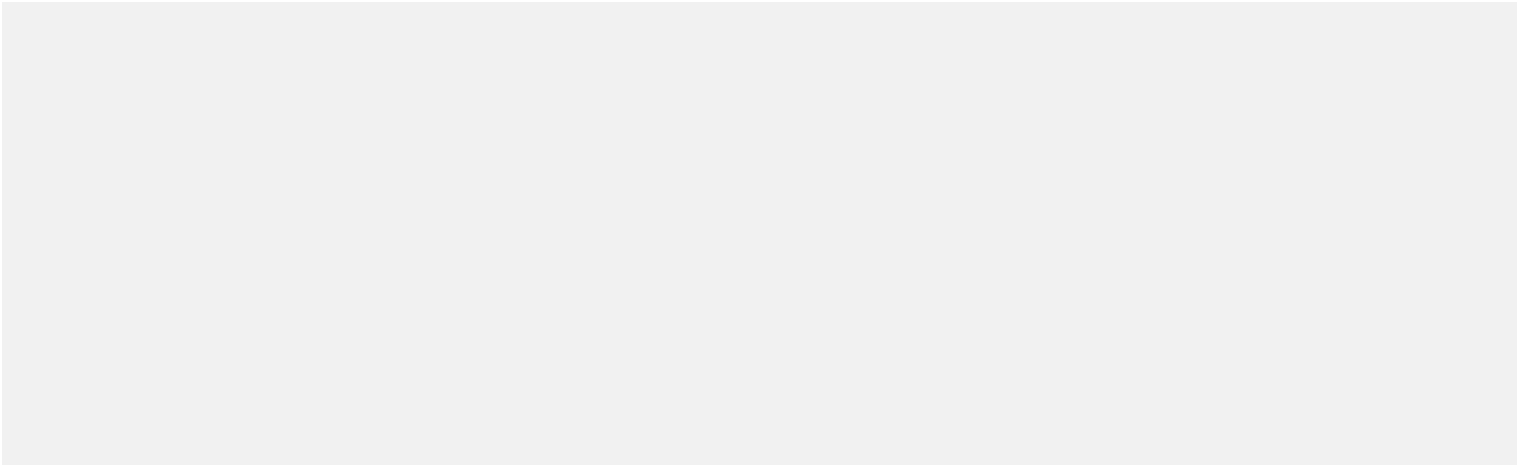


MILITARY

MacDill penalizes base housing operator over mold as Bilirakis launches congressional inquiry

At least two families point to illnesses in their children from mold in their homes. It's a problem plaguing military installations nationwide.





A mattress serves as a couch in the Riverview home of military spouse Amie Norquist and her children, from left, Allie, Ethan, Elise and Jason. Because of mold, the Norquist family had to get rid of their furniture and move from housing at MacDill Air Force Base.

By **Howard Altman**

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TAMPA — When Amie Norquist and her family moved to MacDill Air Force Base in July, they thought they had found their ideal home.

"It was very convenient," said Norquist, a military spouse and mother of four. "The housing in South Tampa is pretty expensive. We drove through the neighborhood there and it looked really nice."

But within a month, her children started getting sick. Breathing problems sent her youngest to the emergency room twice, her 3-year-old came down with pneumonia, and another child's existing health problems grew worse.

Norquist suspected mold. She asked Harbor Bay, the company that manages base properties, to check. Her fears were confirmed.

But for Norquist, 31, and for families like hers at bases nationwide, identifying the problem was just the beginning of a nightmare.

She soon found that she had limited recourse. One reason: The military contracts out 99 percent of housing on its bases to private firms, according to a report in March from the Government Accountability Office.

At least seven other families living in base housing have complained about

mold, judging from a MacDill town hall meeting in October and interviews with the *Tampa Bay Times*. Norquist said even more families have reached out to her through email and social media.

The parent company of Tampa-based Harbor Bay said in a statement that mold problems pointed out by the *Times* have met with "a successful resolution," but that's not Norquist's experience.

Her family was forced to leave their single-family home. The costs they've incurred have put them in debt as they set up a new home in Riverview and work to replace the contaminated furniture they had to dispose of.

"I feel like our family is a little broken at this point," Norquist said. "It has been pretty traumatic."

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MacDill's host command showed its displeasure with Harbor Bay's performance last year by cutting the money the company receives through a performance incentive fee.

The problem also has gotten the attention of U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, who wrote a letter Jan. 25 to Air Force Col. Steve Snelson, the base commander. Bilirakis wants to know the extent of the problem and how MacDill deals with it, now and for the past ten years.

Bilirakis, the Palm Harbor Republican, joins other members of Congress looking into mold at base housing across the country. They include Sens. Diane Feinstein, Mark Warner and Kamala Harris, all Democrats.

The problem is a popular topic on a private Facebook page highlighting complaints nationwide about military housing.

"The mold situation is pervasive at best," said Crystal Cornwall, a military spouse who runs the page.

People living throughout Florida, where annual rainfall averages nearly 60 inches, know the devastation that mold can cause.

But families who live in base housing face a special challenge in trying to do something about it.

Once operated by the government, base housing was found in the mid-1990s to have fallen into such poor condition that nearly two-thirds of it required repair or replacement, the March GAO report said.

According to estimates at the time, the work would cost \$20 billion and take 40 years to complete. So the Pentagon obtained authority from Congress to enter into public-private partnerships.

In return for building base housing, private management companies now are paid directly through the allowance each service member receives for rent and utilities.

Unlike civilians, however, military families cannot place their payments in escrow when problems crop up. What's more, base commanders are limited in how they can intercede with private businesses.

That leaves military families who live on base, already under stress from frequent moves, to deal on their own with the landlord.

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During an [October town hall meeting](#) streamed live over Facebook, where families talked about a number of concerns, Amie Norquist and her husband joined with about a half-dozen MacDill residents to describe their problems with mold.

"I have had sick kids for over a month and myself also," an airman named Ashley Weber wrote during the town hall. "Was also told the attic door was not built with correct materials with the humidity and heat here."

Weber did not respond to a request for comment from the *Times*.

Amanda Bailey, Harbor Bay's community director, took part in that town hall four months ago and thanked Norquist for raising the mold issue.

Still, the problems continued.

There were disagreements, for example, over how to treat the contaminated areas. Norquist wanted Harbor Bay to remove the subflooring, but the company eventually opted just to sand away mold spots, instead.

By the middle of December, the family decided to move. MacDill's host unit, the 6th Air Mobility Wing, paid relocation costs, but the family had to put more than \$6,000 on a credit card to rent the home in Riverview. The reason: Harbor Bay continued collecting their housing allowance until a week after they signed the new lease, Norquist said.

She estimates the family is out \$40,000 considering the costs of furniture and expensive medicines that no longer are usable.

Norquist is one of four spouses who spoke to the *Times* about mold problems at MacDill, on the condition that their husbands were not named out of concern that doing so would hurt their military careers.

Jennifer Tindoll said dealing with the mold problem has been a serious inconvenience for her family, while Candice Cochran said she is satisfied with Harbor Bay's response to her complaint.

Like Norquist, Traci Lenz — wife of a non-commissioned Air Force officer — suspects that mold in her home contributed to illnesses in her three children.

Lenz, 34, asked for extensive mold treatment at her duplex home in October, but Harbor Bay only provided partial treatment, she said. So she purchased her own test kits and provided the results to the company.

Harbor Bay agreed to provide the family temporary housing and to let her break her lease with the company, but only if the family signed a non-disclosure agreement preventing them from talking publicly about their problems.

"I couldn't in good conscience do that," Lenz said. "I want to speak out so that no other family has to go through what we've gone through."

Later, the company relented on that demand.

Matthew Lewis, a Tampa chiropractor specializing in treating mold-related issues, examined both the Norquist and Lenz families. He said their illnesses appear to be caused by mold exposure.

He can't pinpoint the origin, but Lewis said he has examined about a dozen MacDill families for mold-related health issues in the past six to eight months.

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Harbor Bay's parent company, the Michaels Organization of Marlton, N.J., declined to answer detailed questions about the extent of the mold complaints at MacDill.

Regional vice president Sherri Farris pointed to "a successful resolution" of the problems experienced by the four families who spoke with the *Times*, saying, "This includes providing alternative living arrangements at no cost to residents when they need to be temporarily relocated for maintenance repairs to be completed."

Officials at MacDill do not know how many mold complaints there are, just those made directly to the base, according to Capt. Samantha Morrison, a spokeswoman.

Col. Snelson did tell the *Times* about the action the base took in deducting points from Harbor Bay in its performance incentive program, "due to mold remediation complaints raised by some service members."

"The safety and security of our base personnel and their families remains a top priority," Snelson said, "and the ... rating is one way we as the installation host can provide feedback on the base housing project performance."

It's not clear how much of a financial hit that meant for Harbor Bay, but Amie Norquist sees it as validation of her concerns.

"I'm thankful they're acknowledging the issue," she said, "and addressing it."