

A Viral Police Raid Made Moms 4 Housing Famous, But Winning Housing Rights in Oakland Will Make Their Impact Last

After a viral police raid, the group says it's working on what to do with its new property.

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As Black children slept in a quiet home on Magnolia Street, Oakland residents watched as militarized law enforcement officials from the **Alameda County's Sheriff's Office** arrived at the Wedgewood Properties–owned property to arrest Misty Cross, Tolani King, and Dominique Walker (who was absent at the time, due to an appearance on *Democracy Now!*) for the acquisition of a vacant residence — a charge stemming from their efforts just to get a roof over their heads.

Walker wasn't there because she was appearing on *Democracy Now!* to discuss the group's situation, but under the orders of an **Alameda County Superior Court judge**, Cross and King (along with two supporters, Jesse Turner and Walter Baker) were handcuffed and charged with obstruction of police officers, and held in Santa Rita jail on a \$5,000 bond.

They were reunited with their children on January 14, after a community-supported GoFundMe raised the money to pay for the release of the mothers and their advocates. One month later, the **Alameda County District Attorney's office** dismissed the charges.

Teen Vogue reached out to the Alameda County Sheriff's Office about the details of the arrests. Sergeant Ray Kelly, the office's public information officer, characterized the exchange as police carrying out an eviction while Moms 4 Housing and their supporters made a stand.

"They had a movement and brought up a lot of concerns about housing, and especially in the Bay Area, the costs of housing and the fact that people are being displaced and can't afford to live here," Kelly said in a phone interview. "We understood that was their mission, but we had a job to do in our role as the enforcement branch of the court and the sheriff is mandated to do evictions [when there are] valid court orders."

Kelly said police acted after legal due process played out and waited until after the holiday season to carry out the eviction. He said law enforcement had no interest in an escalated situation.

"We were not looking to get into a showdown or a confrontation with members of our community. We wanted to avoid that," he said. "We tried diplomatic approaches, conversations, and were told, 'We're not going to do that, we're going to passively resist, and you're going to have to remove us from the home.'"

"They stayed pretty true to that," he continued. "But they did — and I don't know if this was for optics — barricade the door and we had to breach the door with a ram. We had to take a more serious posture than we normally would with two to three officers on an eviction. We had close to 40 [officers] because of the crowd-control issues."

"We went in with a show of force to an extent, but a show of force is not a use of force, and I think people tend to conflate the two," Kelly said. "We did have a tactical element there in case something went awry.... We had to be prepared for every conceivable type of option that might be available."

The home is owned by a **Southern California-based** real estate investor firm, Wedgewood, which has acquired more than 100 foreclosed residences throughout the Bay Area, a region with the **highest levels of income inequality** in the nation. (*Teen Vogue* has reached out to Wedgewood twice for comment on the details of this story.)

"At least a million tenants in California were displaced by that activity of new owners coming in and giving tenants an eviction notice instead of allowing them to stay, and then flipping the properties," Aimee Inglis — a program director at Tenants Together, a San Francisco-based nonprofit tenant advocacy group — **told NBC News Bay Area in December.**

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Yet, a majority of investor-owned properties remained vacant for years throughout the nine-county area with a homelessness epidemic classified as a "**human rights violation**" by United Nations special rapporteur on adequate housing Leilani Farha. In 2018, **Farha told *East Bay Express***, "What is so stark about the pouring of those vast amounts of money into housing is that hardly any of it is directed towards ameliorating the insufferable housing conditions in which millions live."

As Silicon Valley influences the Bay Area's **workforce** toward technology-centered jobs, low-income individuals are displaced from their homes and forced to **commute from affordable cities**, such as Stockton and Sacramento, in order to secure stable housing for their families. That is an experience shared by Dominique Walker of Moms 4 Housing, who stayed with her aunt in Stockton after she returned home to the Bay Area from Mississippi, where she worked in lactation support for Black mothers. Throughout her

relocation process, Walker organized with low-wage workers, mothers, and teachers who shared the commonality of housing instability in the Bay Area.

“[In the Bay Area,] seven out of 10 homeless people are African American. My whole community is displaced, on the street, or located very far [away],” Walker told *Teen Vogue*. “Among the moms, we formed a group. We wanted to reclaim these vacant homes, and place them back in the hands of the community, and that’s our mission. We want to make sure that all folks that need shelter have shelter. We also want to recognize housing as a human right.”

In his “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” the **Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.** wrote: “One has not only a legal, but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” In alignment with that same Black radical tradition, Walker, Cross, and King occupied the vacant house for more than 57 days because of their moral understanding that every individual, family, and community has a right to stable housing. Coordinated with **ACCE Action** — a multiracial, democratic, nonprofit community organization that builds power to fight and stand for economic, racial and social justice — their peaceful occupation served as real-life inspiration to countless homeless, low-income, and working-wage families.

The Bay Area is a region where people making **more than \$200,000 a year** are considered middle class. According to **California Housing Partnership’s** 2020 report, median rent is \$2,553 and the average worker would need a position starting at \$48.71 per hour to make rent. Because of this, the takeover of a vacant house symbolized a defiance, against the **lack of affordable housing units** administered by local governments.

“There’s four vacant homes for every one homeless person. Where we occupied the house, there is three houses on the corner that are vacant,” said Walker.

Leah Simon-Weisberg, the Moms 4 Housing attorney explained this further, telling the *Guardian*, “[Speculators] created a fake market where people who have cash buy properties, and then middle-class people can’t buy them. They’re cheating essentially, because they’re not buying for housing, they’re buying to sell.”

As Oakland’s Black community sharply **declines** due to the contributing factors of displacement and gentrification, the region’s racial demographics in homeownership are shifting toward a predominantly white composition, despite the city’s lineage of Black Power.

Prior to the arrest, the **real estate firm** offered to finance two months of assistance and shelter through Catholic Charities East Bay for Moms 4 Housing in order to renovate the property for first-time homebuyers. In response, the mothers proposed to purchase the house on Magnolia Street through the Oakland Community Land Trust. After conversations with **Governor Gavin Newsom** and City of Oakland officials, Wedgewood Properties negotiated the sale through Oakland Community Land Trust.

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“We’re doing the right thing; we’re going to be on the right side of history. This [fight] is absolutely necessary. Our people are dying out on the streets, and we don’t mind putting our faces and bodies on the line for that change,” Walker told *Teen Vogue*. “We want housing for everyone, we want to conduct grassroots organizing, and we want to change policy.”

To that end, they're working with local political leaders. Walker explained: "We introduced a Moms 4 Housing ordinance with Councilmember Nikki Fortunato Bas. It's called the Tenants Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA), **and** it gives the first right of refusal to the tenant if the landlord decides to sell. It's a pathway to home ownership for folks who were renting, and you can do that in your entire unit. Everybody just owns their unit."

"We want to be a resource for homeless folks. We're working on the sale of the house now," Walker said. "And we kind of want that to be our headquarters where we organize and become a resource for our community as well as policy change."

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