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KOCO, A 'KICKASS BLACK HERO GROUP,' CREATES SENIOR CITIZENS BILL OF RIGHTS

Marc C. Monaghan, contributing writer
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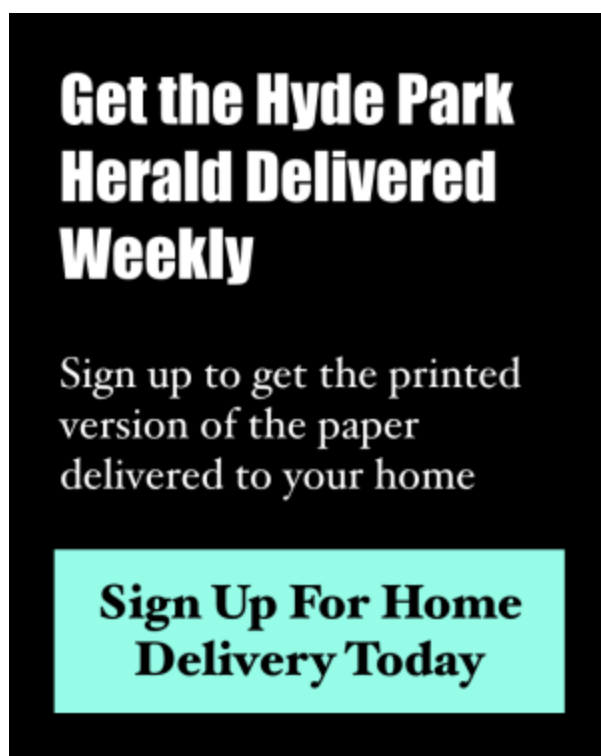
Melissa Land does a little stepping with Shorty Mack as he and his band (not pictured) perform during the Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization's Lawrence Ratliff Senior Cookout on the campus of Dyett High School, 555 E. 61st St., Saturday, August 27.

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"We are here to help you and push you to your destiny, where you need to be, because you deserve to be respected," said Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) housing organizer Bobbi Brown as she spoke to about two hundred seniors gathered on the campus of Dyett High School.

"So many of you all have been disrespected in your buildings," continued Brown referring to interactions the seniors have had with property managers of the 20 or so Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) subsidized residential buildings in North Kenwood, Bronzeville and Woodlawn that serve as their residences."It doesn't make any sense."

The group had gathered Saturday, August 27 at Dyett for KOCO's 7th annual Lawrence Ratliff Senior Cookout. A quiet breeze kept the heat away as the seniors talked among themselves, enjoying the shade of the campus's tall trees. In the background a DJ played some old school dusties as Shorty Mack and his band set up, and a number of KOCO youth volunteers helped prepare the picnic.



Meanwhile, KOCO housing and senior citizen organizers prepared to unveil their latest project.

A SHORT HISTORY OF KOCO

KOCO was founded in 1965 by religious and community leaders as "an instrument for grassroots democracy in the North Kenwood and Oakland communities," per the nonprofit's website.

"Through the sustained engagement of low-income and working families, KOCO develops multi-generational leaders who impact decision-making processes and public policies, improving the quality of life in our local communities," explains its mission.

Over the past decade, KOCO has led fights to preserve community institutions and defend residents from displacement.

In 2015, they organized a 34-day hunger strike to reopen Dyett High School, 555 E. 51st St., and in 2020 they saved Bronzeville's Mercy Hospital from closure. They were also on the front lines of the years-long effort to create the first elected school board in Chicago, won in 2021.

(Alderdwoman Jeanette Taylor (20th), who participated in the hunger strike to save Dyett High School, was an organizer with KOCO.)

KOCO is a founding member of the Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) Coalition, which formed in response to the incoming Obama Presidential Center. The CBA coalition sought an agreement between the Obama Foundation, University of Chicago, City of Chicago and community to ensure that surrounding residents would be able to have a say in and benefit from the influx of money and new development, leading to the passage of an ordinance that set aside 52 city-owned lots for affordable housing development.

In March of this year, KOCO youth organized the We Walk For Her march in Bronzeville, bringing awareness to the unsolved disappearances and murders of young Black women and girls in the community.





Shannon Bennett, executive director of the Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization (KOCO), speaks about a senior bill of rights the organization is developing during KOCO's annual Lawrence Ratliff Senior Cookout on the campus of Dyett Hight School, 555 E. 61st St., Saturday, August 27.

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FIGHTING FOR SENIORS

Recently, KOCO has reinvigorated its efforts aimed at the plight of seniors living in subsidized residential developments.

"We got together as a result of a brother named Lawrence Ratliff," said KOCO senior organizer Alfonso Jones to the crowd of picnickers, explaining the origins of KOCO's Involved Seniors for Justice committee, which has sponsored seven Lawrence Ratliff Senior Cookouts since Ratliff's passing in 2014.



"We created a senior group that fights the alderman, City Hall, police, or anybody else that's causing issues with the seniors, especially and particularly the management companies in these buildings, which everybody knows harasses, threatens and intimidates seniors on a regular basis," continued Jones.

"We have about 60 members and we've come together to put together this Senior Bill of Rights," said Jones, lifting up a copy of the draft Bill. "So far we have 10 items in the Senior Bill of Rights."

As some seniors danced to the music of Shorty Mack and his band, and others ate barbecue, KOCO volunteers passed out copies of the draft Bill of Rights for comment and review.

"Please take a look at them," said Jones. "There's space for any suggestions, recommendations, all

recommendations that you may have. So, once you get these, please fill them out. And we want you to sign on to it."

The first bullet point on the draft Bill of Rights states: "All seniors deserve to be valued, respected, treated fairly and with dignity."

"All seniors have a right to a safe and clean environment to live in," states another.



Senior building residents Ora L. Tate and Stephen Sephus speak during the Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization's annual Lawrence Ratliff Senior Cookout on the campus of Dyett High School, 555 E. 61st St., Saturday, August 27.

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Stephen Sephus, a resident of Woodlawn's Trinity Oaks Apartments, 6225 S. Drexel Blvd., was particularly interested in the section of the proposed Senior Bill of Rights that deals with

evictions: "In the case of eviction, tenants have a right to legal counsel at the owner's expense."

"I've had my second eviction court hearing just yesterday on account of non-payment of rent," said Sephus. He alleged that the property manager has refused to accept rent payments since May of this year.

"She won't accept any rent from me... And now they are proposing to evict me for non-payment of rent. And I need some justice to be served," said Sephus. "I've requested from the eviction court judge a hearing by jury, because I don't see any fairness in this situation at all."

In the summer of 2021, the American Society on Aging reported that nationwide "more than 100,000 renters ages 65 and older and almost 450,000 ages 55 to 64 report they will likely be evicted in the next two months."

In December 2021, a report from the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University stated that "in Chicago, older adult households are increasingly renter households, with substantial growth in both Black and Hispanic older adult households and lower-income households. Additionally, older adult renter households in Chicago are increasingly living in 2 to 4 unit buildings, a critical but threatened component of the housing stock."

As KOCO Executive Director Shannon Bennett looked over the crowd of picnickers, he reflected, "These are people who are in their golden years who still want to be active and who still want to do things."

"Involved Seniors for Justice is a powerful what I call a kickass Black hero group," Bennett added.

Over the next couple of months, KOCO will be presenting the completed Senior Bill of Rights to Chicago's City Council and to state legislators.

In addition, KOCO has organized a group of seniors to go to Washington, D.C. in September to present the Senior Bill of Rights to members of congress. The bus is already full, every seat has been spoken for.