Tracey Scott said it’s not her fault.

The Chicago Housing Authority CEO on Wednesday touted the agency’s efforts to help thousands of people find affordable places to live — and blamed its well-documented failures on “historic challenges” that predated her four-year tenure.

“I’ve heard you,” Scott said to critics during a meeting of the City Council’s Committee on Housing and Real Estate, her first City Hall appearance in more than a year. “We have been addressing historic challenges. ... We have much to celebrate, but there is much more work to do.”

Some alderpeople and almost all members of the public who spoke at the meeting agreed with that last part.
Scott faced withering criticism and calls to resign from residents and even a member of the CHA’s governing board. They said the agency has let its properties deteriorate while failing to build additional homes during a citywide affordable housing crisis. Several resident leaders ripped Scott for rarely visiting CHA properties.

“Tracey Scott, you seem to have forgotten that you are a guest here at CHA — you have outstayed your welcome,” said Francine Washington, speaking directly to Scott.

Washington, a longtime CHA resident, has served on the CHA board since 2014.

“Miss Tracey Scott may be smart, but she has contempt for the residents,” Washington said. “Miss Scott, everybody’s complaining. They’re talking about what they need. The bottom line: She has to go.”

Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez (25th) in City Council chambers last month. (Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago)

Aldvs. Gilbert Villegas (36th) and Byron Sigcho-Lopez (25th), the housing committee chair, had called the hearing partly in response to reporting from the Illinois Answers Project and Block Club Chicago that found hundreds of homes in the CHA’s scattered-site program are sitting empty, often for years.
While the homes go unused, agency officials said more than 120,000 people are on the CHA’s own waiting lists.

Ald. Gilbert Villegas (36th) in City Council chambers last month. (Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago)

Some of the CHA’s vacant properties have become magnets for crime, including one in West Humboldt Park that’s used as a drug stash house.

Villegas cited those findings again during the hearing Wednesday.

“This is unconscionable,” Villegas said. “The status quo is not working and we need answers ... This is not just a housing issue. This is a crime issue. This cannot stand.”

Villegas noted that his family had lived in the CHA’s Lathrop Homes for eight years when he was growing up. Their time in public housing helped his family get ahead, he said.

“I worry others aren’t getting the same opportunities,” Villegas said.
This CHA scattered-site property has become a stash house and a magnet for drug activity on the 800 block of North St. Louis Avenue. (Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago)

But Scott highlighted the CHA’s Restore Home initiative, a pledge to spend up to $50 million in 2024 to rehab dozens of vacant properties.

Over the past four months, the CHA has finished fixing up five apartment buildings and three houses, Scott said.

Despite that modest start to the program, a number of alderpeople accepted Scott’s argument that the CHA is making progress on preserving and constructing more housing.
This historic row house on the 105th block of South Corliss Avenue is one of the CHA Restore Home properties that has been vacant for nearly two decades. (Credit: Alex Wroblewski/Block Club Chicago)

Though residents and neighbors have been “very unhappy with CHA historically,” officials seem to be making “some big improvements on some core areas,” said Ald. Maria Hadden (49th).

Still, Hadden suggested CHA officials provide more data to back up their testimony.

“It would be good to see the numbers,” Hadden said.

Ald. Jessie Fuentes (26th) noted the CHA had turned over 23 acres of its property to the billionaire-owned Chicago Fire soccer team — one of a series of deals the agency made to sell off vacant land even as it struggled to build new housing.

“The CHA has given away land through dispositions like the soccer facility,” Fuentes said. “What [other] dispositions are in the queue?”
Members of both Bethel Mennonite Community Church and the Working Family Solidarity organization hold a prayer vigil for “Justice at ABLA Homes” last July. A soccer facility is now under construction at the site. (Credit: Alex Wroblewski/Block Club Chicago)

Scott said the Fire agreement was “a rare opportunity.” Though she previously opened the door to additional deals, Scott told alderpeople, “We do not have plans right now to do any dispositions for [things like] a soccer facility.”

The CEO also told the committee the CHA plans to accelerate its pace of housing construction and launch a “customer call center” so residents, applicants and others “can get in touch with us.”

While most alderpeople gave Scott the benefit of the doubt, CHA residents and neighbors were far less charitable during the public testimony part of the meeting. Residents spoke of coping with roaches, mold, and sewage and plumbing problems in their apartments.

“I have had people who have died from elevators not working, firemen not getting there in time, we drink brown water because the galvanized piping has not been changed since 1970,” said Lindsay Graves, a resident leader at the Vivian Carter
Apartments in Englewood. “I would say it’s time for change at the head of CHA — we need something much better than this.”

Les Kniskern has lived kitty-corner from a scattered-site home in Montclare for more than 13 years. The home has been empty and unused that entire time — except when it was infested with raccoons. He suggested the CHA was squandering money from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Neighbor Les Kniskern poses for a portrait outside the neglected CHA scattered site building at 2956 N. Oak Park Ave. in Montclare on Nov. 21, 2023. (Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago)

“How has this been an effective or responsible use of the HUD funds, sitting on it for more than 13 years until it’s unusable?” Kniskern said.

The CHA is formally an independent government body with its own board responsible for providing oversight. But last month, alderpeople advanced a measure to increase oversight of the agency, and Scott agreed to testify before the housing committee.

“That is important not only for council members but more importantly for residents,” Sigcho-Lopez (25th) said at the time. “I think it’s important that we
have checks and balances and accountability in every delegate agency.”