



Tenant Solidarity

News and Information from the Tenants Union of Washington State

September 2012



Longtime TU members and leaders from the Gates family show off their sign at our summer BBQ

Stand Up for Safe & Healthy Housing on October 1st

A strong showing of tenants is needed to pass an effective housing inspection program in Seattle

Rental Housing Inspection Program City Council Meeting

Monday, October 1st at 2 pm
Seattle City Hall, 600 Fourth Avenue
2nd Floor Council Chambers

Check www.tenantsunion.org for details and location updates

The Seattle City Council needs to hear from YOU in the fight for healthy and safe homes. We need a powerful presence of tenants represented at this meeting to show support for safe and healthy rental homes in Seattle. Mark your calendars and email Seattle City Councilmembers in favor of a strong proactive code enforcement program! Read page 3 for more information, or contact Kylin at (206) 722-6848 x 109 or kylinp@tenantsunion.org.

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TU members rallying for housing justice

Director's Corner

The impacts of the recession have been quickly and deeply felt by Washington's tenants. The old systems designed to protect our housing are simply no longer enough, bringing new urgency to the fight for stronger protections to secure safe and decent homes.

And yet despite overwhelming adversity and interconnected oppression, despite all the barriers at work to arrest our progress, *tenants are standing up and fighting back* – and winning. TU leaders fought the illegal eviction of Section 8 voucher holders in Redmond and worked within a coalition to successfully pass a Source of Income Discrimination ordinance. Tenants impacted by discriminatory screening practices lobbied alongside the Housing Alliance to require stronger disclosure requirements for tenants in the tenant screening process. TU members are now leading the campaign to eradicate slumlords and substandard housing in the City of Seattle.

At the heart of all of these campaigns have been tenants like you who turned their personal stories of heartbreak, challenge, and oppression into tools for creating change. I am constantly in awe of the courage and dedication of these tenants, people who have to juggle jobs, family commitments, and still face retaliation from landlords for standing up for their rights.

(continued next column)



Jonathan speaking at the 2012 NAHT Conference

You're Invited

Tenants Union Annual Meeting



Saturday, Oct 20th 1-3 pm
Washington Hall Lodge Room
153 14th Avenue, Seattle

Please join TU staff, board, and members
for an afternoon of connection, action,
and celebration!

The meeting space is wheelchair accessible. Please contact Emil Paddison with any questions or requests at (206) 722-6848 x 103 or emilp@tenantsunion.org

Tenants can no longer wait for things to get better on their own after this economic meltdown. Banks have demonstrated the limitations of their tolerance for the people who reside in their 'property portfolios.' The fault lines revealed by the economic crisis have shown that people's fundamental relationship to property and land are far more delicate and exposed to insecurity than what has been taken for granted in more certain times. The line between homeowner, tenant, and the homeless is a line drawn thinner each year. Now more than ever tenants must organize and work together in solidarity to fight and establish the security of their tenancy as a human right. ♦

Jonathan Grant

Why We Fight for Healthy Housing for All

One tenant's personal experience working to pass the Rental Housing Inspection Program

By Corey Snelson, PhD, TU Member, Volunteer Tenant Counselor, and Organizing & Advocacy Committee Member

On October 1, 2012, Seattle tenants are poised to win an enormous battle. Over the last 20 years, the Tenants Union has been working to establish a Rental Housing Inspection Program (RHIP). This program would provide a basic level of inspection for all rental units in the city of Seattle, assuring that tenants are living in dwellings meeting a minimum of health and safety standards.

I became involved with the RHIP campaign as a tenant leader when it became clear that I was living in a substandard dwelling that was established illegally. It had no fire escape and was teeming with mold growth (see page 7 for more information on dealing with mold). After contacting the TU for information, I learned how to assert my rights to healthy housing. I contacted the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) of the City of Seattle to request an inspection. This highlights an enduring problem with the current inspection system of rental units in Seattle: inspections are based solely on tenant complaints. If a tenant is not aware that this complaint-based program exists, or they have reason to suspect that their landlord may retaliate against them for filing a complaint, tenants are left without a mechanism to enforce the laws and demand their basic right to healthy housing.

The current RHIP program as outlined by the DPD will be voted on by Seattle City Council on October 1st requires all rental units in the city to be inspected regularly. These inspections will identify sources of moisture in the home that lead to unhealthy mold growth, pest infestations, ensure the adequacy and safety of plumbing and electricity, find units that have been established illegally, and assure that there are clear routes of fire escape. Fines will be placed on landlords who do not comply with these minimum standards.

As a tenant leader on the RHIP campaign, I have had the pleasure of speaking repeatedly in front of Seattle City council, helped teach my neighbors how



Corey was one of several tenants whose powerful testimonies to Seattle City Council were featured on the evening news

to assert their rights under the Landlord-Tenant Act, and work to empower my neighbors who cannot use their voices to be heard. In this capacity I have not only helped myself and my neighbors, but I have gone a long way toward healing the damage caused by a landlord more concerned with his bottom line than the health and safety of his tenants.

Everyone deserves safe and healthy housing. Please write to your city council members today to ask them to support the RHIP program for all Seattle tenants. If you would like to get involved in the RHIP campaign and have your voice heard, please contact Kylin Parks at (206) 722-6848 x 109 or kylinp@tenantsunion.org. Together we can assure a basic level of health and safety for all Seattle tenants!

Please send a letter to City Council today, tell your story, and plan on joining us on October 1st for the Council meeting. ♦

Visit www.tenantsunion.org for more information.



TU Education Program

How to get help from the TU

The TU's Education Program helps tenants to get the knowledge and skills to keep themselves and their families safely housed. The TU provides empowerment-based tenant counseling, education, and assistance to help tenants learn their rights and take action to resolve housing problems. Trained non-attorney Tenant Counselors offer free phone and walk-in tenant counseling services to assist people with questions about landlord-tenant laws and discuss strategies to prevent housing loss.

Tenants Rights Hotline: (206) 723-0500

10 am – 12:30pm Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday
1:30pm – 4pm Wednesday
Interpretation is available in many languages

TU Member Line: (206) 722-6848 x 8

Walk-In Clinics

Columbia City: 1:30pm – 4pm Mon, Tue
West Seattle: 5 – 7pm Wed
Lake City: 4:30pm – 6:30pm Thurs

See www.tenantsunion.org for addresses and directions



Tenant Counseling Volunteers at their first training session. Volunteer Coordinator Stina Janssen (fourth from right) is standing next to Janet Welt (third from right)



TU members Theresa and Gaby write letters in support of the Rental Housing Inspection program

Knowledge is Power

From Tenant to Tenant Counselor

By Janet Welt, TU Member, Volunteer Housing Counselor, and OAC Member

In 1996 I became a member of the TU after I called the Tenants' Rights Hotline and was given very useful information about how to prevent the loss of my housing. I was so impressed with the service provided by the TU's Education Program that I committed to becoming actively involved and learning as much as I could about the issues and laws that affect tenants. I did so, and found myself doing rewarding social justice work as part of a wonderful community for years.

About this time last year, I opened an issue of *Tenant Solidarity* and read about an opportunity to take part in a newly-formed training program for people wanting to volunteer as Housing Counselors with the Education Program. That formal training was exactly what I needed in able to provide quality counseling services to assist people with questions about landlord-tenant laws and to discuss strategies to prevent housing loss. I am very proud that, thanks to the vision and efforts of the TU staff, I now have the ability to offer fellow tenants free empowerment-based tenant counseling, education, and assistance to learn their rights and take action to resolve housing problems. I'm finding much joy and purpose in extending membership invitations, welcoming people into the TU family, and working together for housing justice. ♦

New Tenant Leadership Committee Formed

Organizing & Advocacy Committee (OAC) guides and supports the work of the TU

The TU is pleased to announce the formation of a new tenant leadership body called the Organizing and Advocacy Committee (OAC). The mission of the OAC is to engage, connect, and support the leadership of tenants, members, board members, and allies to support the work of the TU and increase our capacity for education, outreach, and organizing.

The OAC will create meaningful opportunities for tenant leaders to remain engaged in the TU's work even after the campaign they were involved in has ended. These experienced leaders will support the new leadership and growth of ongoing organizing work at the TU, and will use their expertise to inform the direction of the work. OAC members will support TU campaigns by engaging allies, speaking to groups, recruiting members, and helping raise funds. At the first OAC meeting, tenant leader Kim Bovee said, "The energy, togetherness, values, the *fight* we have at the TU is tremendous. It's so good to be here."

To find out more about how to get involved in the OAC, please contact Emil Paddison at (206) 722-6848 x 103 or emilp@tenantsunion.org. ♦

Housing Access Project

TU organizing will focus on removing barriers to housing for low income tenants

We are pleased to announce Stina Janssen as the TU's Housing Access Project (HAP) Organizer. The mission of HAP is to increase access and undo institutional barriers to decent, affordable housing for communities criminalized, marginalized, and segregated by commercial and judicial systems. HAP uses organizing, outreach, and political education to develop strong tenant leadership to end housing discrimination against communities disproportionately impacted by race and class bias in the tenant screening, court, and criminal justice systems.

Housing Access Project Goals

- Make eviction records sealable for tenants who won in eviction court, were wrongly evicted, or have records related to their status as domestic violence survivors.
- Make credit reports portable and affordable.
- Prevent tenant screening companies from using domestic violence records in housing decisions.
- Support tenants in asserting their rights under landlord-tenant law without fear of retaliation from the landlord in the form of an eviction filing.
- Make it illegal to discriminate against people who use Section 8 vouchers or other governmental source of income (social security, disability) to pay their rent. ♦



"The Tenants Union opened the door to the information, the help, and the support my community needs. I would never have believed my story could do so much to help people. When I work with the TU, educating myself to help my family,

I know I have the power and I am not afraid to stand up for my community." - TU Member Florencia Ybarra

News in Brief: Recent Victories for Housing Justice

Celebrating the successes of the TU and tenants across the state

Source of Income Discrimination Passes in Redmond



(L to R) TU board member Omar Barraza, tenant leader Yezenia Hernandez and her partner, TU staff Kylin Parks and Jonathan Grant celebrate the unanimous 7-0 Council vote

Moved by the powerful testimony of TU tenant leader and Section 8 renter Yezenia Hernandez, the Redmond City Council passed an ordinance to outlaw discrimination based on a person's source of income. Redmond joins 13 other states and 38 other local jurisdictions that have passed Source of Income Discrimination laws that make it illegal to discriminate against someone solely because they are using a Section 8 voucher to help pay their rent. Seattle, Bellevue, and unincorporated King County have similar protections.

TU Awarded Grant from Social Justice Fund NW Environmental Giving Project



The TU is extraordinarily honored to be the recipient of a \$10,000 grant from the Environmental Giving Project of the Social Justice Fund NW. Giving projects are mixed class, multiracial groups that raise funds and make grants to local organizations working for social justice. The award will fund Healthy Housing Organizing work. The TU would like to express our deep gratitude for being entrusted with this tremendous resource.

New TU Website Explodes

The expanded TU website www.tenantsunion.org has become a huge resource for tenants across Washington State! Use of the website has gone up over 200% and over 400,000 unique visitors will visit the site in the next year. The most viewed sections are Rental Agreements, Deposits, and Evictions. We will continue to add and update the content to make the site the most comprehensive resource available to tenants in the State. You can find answers to over 100 common questions and extensive resource lists on many topics of interest to renters. Take a look at www.tenantsunion.org.

Part One of the Fair Tenant Screening Act Becomes Law



Governor Christine Gregoire signs Senate Bill 6315.

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Governor Gregoire signs SB 6315 into law surrounded by housing advocates who worked for its passage

New laws (SB 6315) passed to provide tenants with greater transparency in tenant screening. As of June 7th, 2012 landlords are required to disclose in writing both the reason why a tenant is denied housing and what criteria they will use in their rental decision. This is a hard fought victory for the TU membership, tenant leaders, and ally the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance.

Dealing with Mold

Mold growth in rental units can contribute to health concerns

By Corey Snelson, PhD, TU Member

A basic need for human survival is the need for healthy housing. Many things can threaten that basic need, one of which is the presence of mold in the living quarters. Molds are found everywhere in our environment including air, soil, and water supplies, but when normal amounts of mold are exposed to large amounts of water they can grow at an exponential rate in buildings in which people live and work. This may result in potentially serious health problems for the occupants, especially young children, immunocompromised individuals, and the elderly. Mold is a fungal organism that thrives in warm moist environments. Higher winter temperatures and high year-round humidity in the Pacific Northwest provide an ideal breeding ground for many of these molds when they flood living spaces, threatening the health of the occupants.

After a building has become wet and mold is allowed to grow, subsequent drying of building materials often forces molds to sporulate and disperse where they can circulate in internal air and heating ducts, making inhalation of mold spores easier and control of infestation more difficult.

The causes of mold toxicity in humans are still poorly understood, and many reports suggest that different strains of mold in conjunction with different building materials will produce different symptoms, making identifying the causes of illness much more difficult to pinpoint. Mild symptoms of mold infestation include respiratory congestion, skin rash, and exhaustion, that in unresolved cases can lead to the development of severe pathogenic infections, immunological responses that lead to inflammation, nephropathy, asthma, peritonitis, and even central and peripheral nervous system damage.

Unfortunately, the laws supporting tenants that have problems with mold that are unrelated to structural

defects are weak in Washington state. You can protect yourself from the ill health effects of a mold infestation before moving into a new home by asking your landlord if it has flooded in the past, or if former tenants had complained about mold. For potential sources of mold, look for cracks in the walls, cracks in windows, feel around doorjamb and window ledges for air leaks. If after moving in you discover a structural defect that could lead to mold infestation, request a repair in writing with your landlord citing the appropriate laws.

There are many resources dedicated to teaching tenants how to identify and clean up mold infestations. Visit www.tenantsunion.org for a list of resources and information on responding to mold issues. ♦

TU Launches *Tenants Unite!* Language Access Project

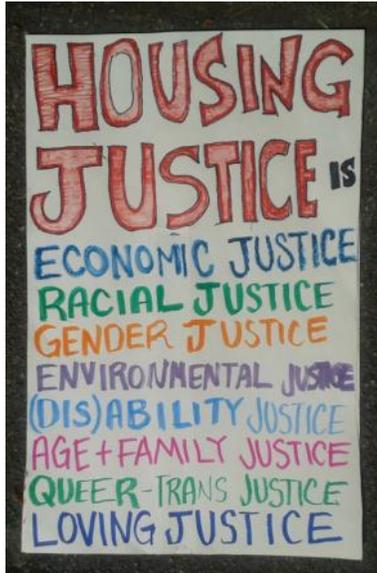
Empowering Seattle's immigrant communities with tenants' rights information

The TU is pleased to be the recipient of a City of Seattle Technology Matching Fund grant in 2012. The *Tenants Unite! Language Access Project* will expand the Tenants Union's website and mobile access to include tenants' rights resources and information in Spanish, Vietnamese, and Somali. The grant will also provide computer workstations, interpretation and tech training in the Rainier Valley, and training tenants in immigrant and ethnic communities to use online tools to share their stories and take leadership in their communities.



Burmese tenants at Asian Counseling & Referral Services receive tenants' rights information from TU staff

The Tenants Union builds power in the movement for tenants' rights and housing justice. Give today!



"The TU is a powerful political voice for renters."

- City Councilmember Nick Licata



Please make a donation to support the TU. Thank you!
Visit www.tenantsunion.org or call Kylin at (206) 722-6848 x 109 to donate

TU EVENT CALENDAR

Save the Date

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Tenants Union of Washington State

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