



Illegal evictions, housing discrimination a concern during coronavirus pandemic



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Fair housing advocates are keeping an eye out for predatory or illegal housing practices exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, including illegal evictions, sexual harassment, and discrimination.

Representatives from Toledo’s Fair Housing Center, the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Northern District of Ohio, and Legal Aid of Western Ohio held a roundtable discussion by video conference on Friday to help tenants, landlords, and homeowners understand their rights.



“Housing has always been a very critical, fundamental thing, but right now in the midst of this pandemic, we are all realizing how vital housing really is and how important it is to have a safe, stable place to call home,” said Sarah Jenkins, the Fair Housing Center’s public policy director.

George Thomas, vice president and general counsel at the Fair Housing Center, said denying someone housing because they have been diagnosed with or come into contact with someone with coronavirus is a violation of fair-housing protections.

A lot of households are facing financial difficulties as unemployment has skyrocketed during the coronavirus outbreak, and that means many people are struggling to keep up with rent or mortgage payments.

While there is no statewide moratorium on evictions, many area courts are closed because of the coronavirus, and landlords are not allowed to conduct evictions on their own, said Alicia Kingston, staff attorney for Legal Aid of Western Ohio.

They must give proper notice, file through the court, and utilize a sheriff’s deputy or bailiff to remove a tenant’s belongings, if it gets to that point.

But housing advocacy groups across the country have received reports of landlords conducting their own evictions, either by changing an apartment’s locks, boarding up doors and windows, or setting a tenant’s belongings at the curb or taking them to the landfill, Ms. Kingston said.

She urged anyone who has experienced an illegal eviction to report it to the Fair Housing Center.

“I really encourage people to do as much documentation as possible, especially if their belongings have been set out. Take photos of what has happened,” Ms. Kingston said.



The federal CARES Act also provides some protections for tenants during the pandemic by prohibiting evictions until July 25 of most people living in federally subsidized housing. This also applies to tenants living in homes covered by a federally-backed mortgage.

For property owners, the CARES Act allows those with a federally-backed mortgage to request a forbearance for up to a year.

That could help landlords who are not collecting full rent payments because their tenants are facing financial hardship also weather the crisis, Ms. Jenkins said.

Toledo Municipal Court will start hearing evictions again on June 1. Ms. Kingston encouraged landlords and tenants to work out a rent repayment plan before turning to the eviction process.

The panel also discussed the prevalence of sexual harassment in housing.

U.S. Attorney Justin Herdman, whose office serves all of northern Ohio, said sexual harassment is an issue Justice Department officials have doubled down on in the past few years, and they are paying even closer attention now.

“This is particularly poignant now during the COVID pandemic,” he said. “When we have this extreme financial distress that we’re seeing with millions of Americans out of jobs now, this is just fertile ground for abuse.”

Sexual harassment can be a landlord offering a break on rent in exchange for sex, or a landlord threatening to neglect repairs unless they receive a sexual favor. It can also be less overt, such as a landlord sending sexually explicit comments or text messages or letting themselves into a tenant’s residence unannounced.

Mr. Herdman said he understands reporting this type of harassment can be intimidating, but he urged tenants to come forward.



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“You are probably not the only victim here, so the more that we can hear reports about landlords who have engaged in these types of unsavory or illegal practices, the better off we are to be able to prevent it from happening in the future and to other people,” he said.

He added that any gender can be a victim of sexual harassment, and people should still report the behavior even if they complied with a landlord’s request for sex.

Anyone who has experienced sexual harassment in housing or knows someone who has is asked to contact the Civil Rights Division by calling 844-380-6178 or emailing fairhousing@usdoj.gov. Mr. Herdman advised anyone who files a complaint to include their city or nearest U.S. attorney’s office to ensure it gets to the right place.

The Fair Housing Center can be reached at 419-243-6163.