

Eviction education, in a comic book form

BY JARED PABEN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In the comic, the renters' attorney asks in court whether the landlord has any documentation proving the tenants are bad and should be forced to move out.

"They're terrible tenants; they just ARE!" the landlord replies.

The renter responds, holding up documentation: "Your honor, we asked for repairs, and received an eviction notice three days later. This is clearly retaliation."

The scene is included in a new comic book created by the Portland-based organizations Community Alliance of Tenants (CAT) and Know Your City. The comic book, called "Know Your Rights: Don't Get Evicted," aims to deliver important renters' rights information in a fun and accessible format.

"Many tenants may learn about their rights through the comic book that would not have learned about them from more traditional forms of information like pamphlets and information sheets," said Julia Olsen, director of the Portland Regional Office of Legal Aid Services of Oregon. Her office provides legal assistance to low-income residents of Multnomah, Clackamas, Wasco, Hood River and Sherman counties.

"Getting the word out to tenants about their rights in as many formats and languages as possible is more important than ever right now because of the historically tight rental market," she said.

The comic book comes at a time of increasing redevelopment and gentrification in Portland neighborhoods, leading to the displacement of residents. Portland received 254 applications to demolish single-family houses in 2013, a number that hadn't been seen since before the Great Recession, according to the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. Between 2010 to 2014, the city has allowed more than 900 demolitions of single-family residences.

But the prevalence of no-cause evictions, a category of eviction often used to remove residents in anticipation of redevelopment, is difficult to quantify.

"There is no recording mechanism for no-cause terminations, so we don't even have estimates," said Justin Buri, executive director of CAT. "Most tenants move out

when they receive a no-cause, since there is almost no ability to fight it. If they move out before the end of the 30- or 60-day notice period, it doesn't go to court, so there is no public record."

No-cause evictions, in contrast to for-cause or nonpayment of rent evictions, are "the primary way for a landlord or developer to empty the unit to remodel, flip or demolish and redevelop the property," Buri said.

"In this process, not only is the current tenant displaced, but we lost overall affordability," he said, "since the rent will be much higher with the redevelopment."

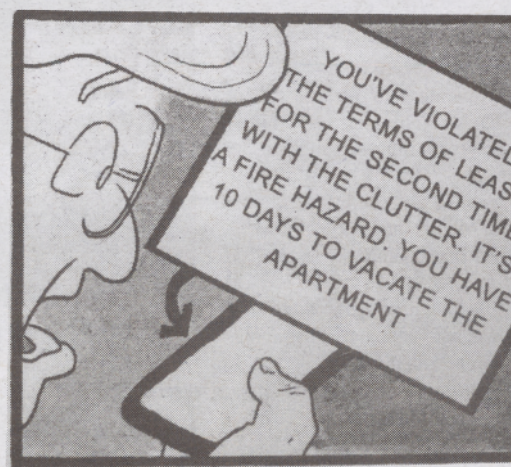
Overall, average apartment rents in the Portland metro area are continuing to increase at an annual rate of 11 percent, according to a fall 2014 report by Multifamily NW, a rental-housing association.

Redevelopment and gentrification is "undoubtedly" causing an increase in no-cause evictions, but data is limited, Buri said. Very few renters who receive no-cause termination notices take the dispute to court. A CAT survey showed only about 1 in 10 hotline callers who received a no-cause eviction notice also received an order from a judge removing them from their home. And, out of 2,166 evictions tracked over a four-month period, 4.7 percent filed in Multnomah County courts were no-cause evictions, according to an September 2013 policy brief from the Multnomah County Health Department.

In contrast, renters facing eviction for nonpayment of rent generally lack money for another rental, so they stay and keep a roof over their heads until a judge orders them out, Buri said.

CAT is currently working with a research partner to collect and analyze more data on no-cause evictions, Buri said. In addition to surveying, that process will include using focus groups with tenants. Other cities, such as Seattle and San Francisco, have used the information to map trends in gentrification.

Each quarter, CAT provides counseling for 120 to 170 evictions-related callers, Buri said. That estimate, however, is largely a reflection of CAT's staff and volunteer capacity to respond to calls, not the demand that's out there. Demand is increasing, he said, and CAT doesn't have the resources to respond to every caller.



ARTWORK BY BECKY HAWKINS

About the book "Know Your Rights: Don't Get evicted!"

The comic book was funded with a \$10,000 grant from paper company Sappi, \$4,600 from the Regional Arts and Culture Council and additional funds from Community Alliance of Tenants (CAT). In all, the project cost roughly \$18,000. A total of 2,500 English copies have been printed, and it's currently being translated for an additional 1,000 Spanish-language copies.

Since the book came out in March, more than 1,000 copies have been distributed. CAT plans to place copies in public libraries and upload a digital copy to the CAT website.

Donations are welcome, although renters who need a copy can get one for no charge.

The hope is the comic book helps educate renters on their rights before they run into trouble. The medium was also chosen to put legal information in a story format to accommodate people with different learning styles.

The comic book is the brainchild of Buri, who realized renters weren't seeking out information on their legal rights until they were already neck-deep in eviction proceedings. Some people contacted CAT for help when they had a court proceeding scheduled for the following day, he said.

"Oftentimes, tenants didn't proactively arm themselves with information until it was too late," Buri said.

The book includes three scenarios: a woman facing eviction for nonpayment of rent, a wheelchair-bound man facing a for-cause eviction over clutter near his front door and a family facing a no-cause eviction after asking their landlord for repairs.

Portland artist Becky Hawkins was selected through a competitive process to illustrate the book.

"I hope that it presents an accessible face to something that's usually not," she said.

The book reflects reality, both in the stories presented and the art.

"I actually went to evictions court one morning partly to see what the evictions process looks like and partly to make sketches," Hawkins said.

Working on a social-justice-oriented project was gratifying, she said, although she was so involved in the nuts and bolts of creating it the significance didn't immediately hit her.

The subject matter was, at times, difficult, Hawkins said. She heard a story of a family forced to retrieve their pet from the Humane Society because the landlord had called for it to be picked up while the family was out getting a moving truck.

"Ideally, also, some landlord is going to read that and find out their responsibilities," she said of the book, "or have some more understanding of how their actions will impact their renters."

Visit [Community Alliance of Tenants at OregonCAT.org](http://CommunityAllianceofTenants.org) or call the CAT Renters' Rights Hotline at 503-288-0130 (hours are Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday 1-5 p.m., Tuesday 6-8 p.m.).

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