



HOUSING

Stand Up For Your Rights

Renters group offers resources

BY SARAH BLOUNT
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

As I sat down last spring to sign a lease for a home with a property management company, I realized the company had many rules, regulations and rights.

Shortly after I moved, my two housemates and I discovered that our backyard was a disaster zone of buried glass, rusted machinery parts, utensils and even some old clothing and bones. When it became apparent that the foreign material would continue to rise to the surface no matter how hard we tried to remove it, we called the management company and explained our situation. An employee responded the next day, but he told us their client, the house's owner, was already aware of the backyard mess and had no intention of removing it.

We began to wonder, what are our rights as renters?

I checked out a library book on Oregon landlord and tenant law, which taught me that a landlord is to maintain premises in a habitable condition. I knew that anyone walking barefoot in my hazardous backyard would need a tetanus shot, so I checked out another book on tenant rights and learned how to write a demand letter for the services we needed. I got the result I wanted, straight from the company's owner. She personally inspected my yard and we came up with some solutions.

I learned a little about my rights as a renter, but it turns out I could have received even more education and support at the Community Alliance of Tenants.

The alliance is on a mission to educate and empower low-income and minority renters to demand affordable, stable and safe rental homes.

As an organization for tenants by tenants, the grassroots alliance also promotes the creation of more affordable housing.

"There's a lack in both private housing and subsidized markets," said Elisa Aguilera, the alliance's lead organizer.

She said federal cuts have reduced low-income housing availability, and private market rent is going up as property value skyrockets.

"We see a lot of a families doubling up," she said. "Folks are settling for substandard housing because they can't afford to shop around for better options."

The group's website has resources to give renters a stronger voice and empower them to advocate for themselves. It isn't

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a substitute for the advice of an attorney, but has general information, advice and tips, as well as links to legal aid and Oregon laws. Tenants with additional questions can leave voice messages with the Renters' Rights Hotline at 503-288-0130.

The alliance has two programs, run mostly by volunteers and members: the Housing Justice Program focuses on affordable housing issues and the termination of 30-day no cause evictions. The Safe Housing Project organizes for immediate repairs in apartment complexes and promotes laws against substandard housing. Volunteers with the Renter Stability Education Program run the hotline and workshops on renters' rights.

Since forming in 1996, they've counseled nearly 20,000 tenants through their hotline, and worked with other groups to win passage for the city of Portland's "no net loss policy", which provides affordable housing in gentrified central-city neighborhoods.

The Community Alliance of Tenants is currently asking City Council to commit \$30 million for affordable housing and are lobbying for the Portland Development Commission to commit 30 percent of urban renewal funds to affordable housing.

If you are interested in joining or supporting the Community Alliance of Tenants, visit www.oregoncat.org and click the "getting involved" or "join CAT" links.

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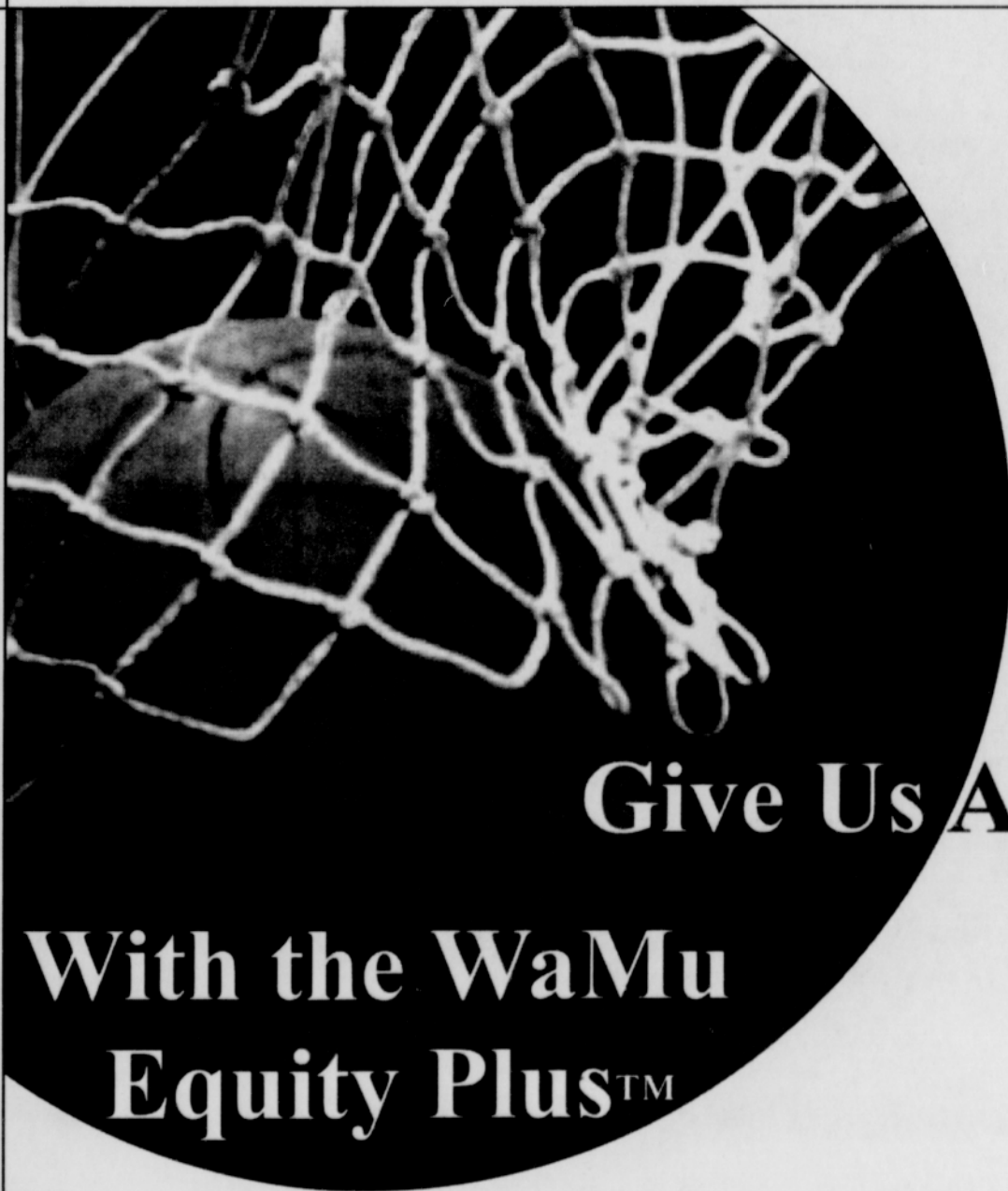
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paredness class that helps people repair their credit, establish a budget and understand the rental application process.

Matheson said with more people buying homes there are fewer rental vacancies, and rent prices are on the rise. With so many homebuyers, more rental properties are available.

"What I understand from landlords is that's starting to turn, and there will be vacancies," she said.

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