

# Landlord-Tenant Conflicts, Negligence

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month, which doubles after three months.

It's difficult to get a snapshot of the state of Portland housing, but according to the U.S. Census over 70 percent of housing in Portland was built before 1970, which are more likely to be in disrepair.

According to Bureau of Development Services numbers, between July 1 and Aug. 27 it received 240 housing complaints, 65 percent of which came from rental properties.

"We get quite a few phone calls about [tenants having problems]," said Matt Kinshella, external relations coordinator for 211Info, a referral service that helps people navigate community and health services.

211Info received 616 calls regarding landlord/tenant issues so far for the current fiscal year, slightly up from last year. The zip code that generated the most calls was 97233, which encompasses part of outer southeast Portland

and Gresham, which generated 78 calls. The next zip code was 97205, which encompasses part of downtown. It generated 50 calls.

Housing inspectors haven't been the only ones inundated with calls for help. The Oregon Community Alliance of Tenants, a nonprofit that advises renters of their rights and responsibilities, also its hands full.

Housed in the basement of the St. Augustana Lutheran Church in northeast Portland, the alliance gets about 40 messages a day from distressed renters, which sometimes overwhelms its voicemail system according to Cristina Palacios, the safe housing coordinator for the organization.

At the alliance office, Palacios spends quite a bit of time on the phone fielding and responding to complaints.

She often gives tenants the number to the housing inspector, but said that's seldom a straightforward solution. The short-staffed bureau is having a hard

time keeping up with complaints, said Palacios, and she suspects that landlords are aware of the situation and are using it to their advantage.

"It's not a working system," said Palacios of the remedies available to tenants.

Palacios said that housing advocates often encounter landlords who place their bottom line above the inhabitability of their properties, and put in the bare minimum maintenance on their rentals. Tenants who complain, said Palacios, are met with a common refrain: "If you don't like it, leave."

She described one mother who called whose daughter was hospitalized twice from mold, only to be told to leave by her landlord. Another mother would send her children to school without taking showers due to a lack of hot water. A diabetic man called in after his year's supply of insulin spoiled from a broken refrigerator.

"My concern is how many tenants are going through this," said Palacios.

Palacios said that there is a gulf between landlords, who typically have more money and resources, and tenants, who may not even be aware of their rights, and may worry about retaliation if they exercise them.

Portland City Council has taken note of the issue, and taken some actions.

In 2008, City Council voted to accept the recommendations of the Quality Rental Housing Workgroup - a panel of landlords, tenant advocates, and government officials charged with examining the issue.

Their recommendations included clarifying portions of the city's building code, upping penalties for bad landlords, establishing more proactive inspection practices, stabilizing funding for housing inspectors, and better educating both sides about their rights and responsibilities.

Since accepting the recommendations in principle, the City Council has followed up on some. Fines have been upped on landlords who drag their feet on re-

pairs. The Bureau of Development Services also launched a housing inspections pilot program, where if inspectors saw enough code violations at a multi-dwelling complex, they would knock on other tenants' doors to see if they wanted an inspection.

Caron explained that the idea behind this program is that it takes the pressure off tenants who might worry about provoking the ire of their landlord by initiating a complaint.

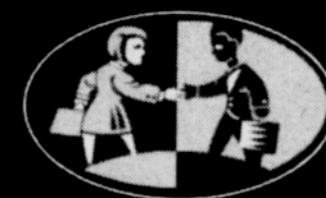
One recommendation that hasn't been followed up on is a plan to stabilize funding for housing inspectors at the bureau.

The Quality Rental Housing Workgroup had initially called for a surcharge on each rental unit to be paid by the landlord to help keep building inspectors at the bureau. However, the idea stalled as the economy collapsed, according to Ty Kovatch - chief of staff to Commissioner Randy Leonard, who has been outspoken on the issue.

"It's just not a good time to add more fees," he said.



## Governor's Marketplace Connection Outreach Events



Governor's  
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### OUS Retainer Program - Professional Consultants

#### Portland Session

**September 10, 2010**

4134 N. Vancouver Ave.  
Portland, OR  
9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m.

#### Salem Session

**September 14, 2010**

4760 Portland Rd. NE  
Salem, OR  
2:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

#### Highlights:

- Doing Business with the Oregon University System
- The Retainer Program
- When/how to register
- Upcoming campus projects

No Charge

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