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On the front lines of Columbus' eviction battle

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Marcus Salter, it seems, is always smiling.

On this day, his madras outfit complements the yellow walls in a local homeless shelter as he leads a group of 25 women in a two-hour workshop on what to do when a landlord threatens eviction.

Community Mediation Services of Central Ohio, whose tools for tenants include these workshops, has a goal of stemming the eviction tide: 18,000 are filed in Franklin County each year, the highest in the state.

More than half of the women in the room have experienced one.

"We're in the midst of an eviction crisis," Salter tells them as he starts the program. "One way to combat it is education, and we want to give you ladies an opportunity to learn. Our goal is to avoid evictions altogether, because we all know it can be hard to move on from that."

Many of the women acknowledge some responsibility but also said they're frustrated with the system, which Salter says he understands. He has first-hand experience.

The upshot

The first six months of 2018 show the city's high eviction count is continuing, but there are some signs of progress, according to information obtained from Franklin County.

The number of eviction cases filed in the county is the exact same that it was in the first half of last year – 8,637 cases. Of those, though, the number resulting in eviction judgments ticked down a bit. The number of Writ of Restitutions – which authorize the U.S. Marshals to schedule an eviction and is a good indicator of an eviction judgement – is down 7 percent from last year, to 4,566.

Of those, the number of set-outs processed – when the landlord actually requests law enforcement to remove a tenant's property – is down 11 percent, to 2,916.

But these numbers only indicate the number of legal proceedings are down. They don't track how many people were actually displaced. It isn't uncommon, for example, for a tenant facing an eviction filing to move in with a friend or relative in a hurry, leaving their rental.

And those initial eviction filings are still very much a part of the problem. Jeff Biehl, executive director of the Prevent Family Homelessness Collaborative, noted there's no way to strike one from a record even if it's withdrawn, making it



CITY OF COLUMBUS

People attend a workshop to educate landlords and tenants about eviction rights. It's led by – at the table – Marcus Salter, third from left, and Councilwoman Jaiza Page, second from right.

harder to find housing in the future.

"You will often hear people who are evicted don't necessarily go to homelessness, but a lot of families that end up homeless have evictions in their background," he said. "It really makes it difficult for families to get housing."

Earlier this year, a group of analysts from around the country called these permanent-mark policies "absolutely ridiculous" and recommended they be taken off the city's books "immediately."

One class at a time

In the meantime, education and prevention efforts have to take place at the grassroots level, with groups like Salter's holding workshops with a few dozen people at a time to educate them about their rights and responsibilities.

Keeping cool, communicating, and working with the landlord are key, Salter said, and all too often a lack of these things makes the process more difficult.

Columbus City Councilwoman Jaiza Page, working with Legal Aid Society of Columbus and Columbus Next Generation, has held a series of workshops to inform landlords and tenants about rental assistance programs, tenant rights and escrow services. The city is exploring how to update its policies, too.

"There are few things we're looking at, like retaliatory evictions," Page said via phone. For example, the city might "beef up our tenant code to provide prosecution for landlords who evict tenants who complain about code violations."

But the main push has been informing tenants and landlords alike about emergency rental assistance and other resources, as well as the letter of the law on how an eviction works, Page said.

Shelley Whalen, executive director of Community Mediation Services, said virtually all of these filings stem from late or non-payment of rent. The group intervenes to help the two parties work out an agreement, or if necessary, a move-out plan.

"I can tell you, roughly 80 percent of the time, we're able to help the tenant and landlord reach an agreement, and of those, about half are pay and stay and half are move out," she said via phone.

Many, but not all, landlords are willing to negotiate, she said, especially if a tenant has been living in a space for more than a year and has a good track record.

Education at the front end has been far more successful in fighting the tide of evictions rather than trying to get involved once court proceedings begin, local experts said. That's because the legal system is fraught with unfamiliar obstacles.

"The vast majority of landlords are represented by legal counsel at court, and almost 90 percent of tenants are not," Whalen said. "There's a definite lack of understanding on the part of tenants – they don't know the process or the language. That's part of what we try to do in the workshop."

After his course is finished, Salter awards each of the women a certificate, a handshake and a friendly "Good luck! Pay your rent!"

"It's up to us to keep our housing because this city is changing," Salter said, his near-constant smile dimming a bit. "Columbus has too many resources to see you in evictions court."

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