

## TENANT STABILIZATION PROJECT

### NEED

Tenants in Santa Rosa are facing unprecedented challenges in maintaining their housing. Rising rents, between 20% and 40% over the past few years, wholesale no cause evictions of entire tenant complexes, and deteriorating housing stock, exacerbated by limited code enforcement bandwidth, are forcing hundreds of tenants into homelessness, or out of Sonoma County.

This exodus threatens the diversity vital to this community's social and economic health; many of these tenants represent our workforce including the backbone of our wine and hospitality industries. ***Legal services for tenants play a vital role in addressing this rental-housing crisis.***

Legal Services for tenants also ***support the city's efforts to reduce the number of homeless individuals in Santa Rosa.*** The leading precursor to becoming homeless, is being evicted. Legal Services are a nationally recognized best practice in homeless prevention. (HUD study). Cities all over the country invest in Legal Aid for tenants, because it saves hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in averted shelter and social service costs.

### Tenant Education

Substandard housing disproportionately affects tenants who do not know their legal rights and are too afraid to complain about conditions. Legal outreach and education to these tenants is essential in getting them to report habitability issues and other housing violations. When trained housing attorneys conduct this outreach, tenants come forward to assert their rights.

### Habitability/Retaliation Advocacy

Tenants who seek to enforce their rights must have legal representation. Legal Aid can assert habitability, retaliation and discrimination claims on behalf of these tenants. Using the civil court system to force landlords to comply with housing codes and other existing tenant protections, will both help ameliorate slum housing conditions, and take pressure off of housing inspectors. Currently, there are no pro-active tenant legal services and virtually no legal services for tenants who seek to bring habitability or other complaints against their landlords. As a result, many tenants do not know their rights, or fear retaliation and therefore say nothing.

### Eviction Defense/Section 8 Advocacy

Tenants need legal representation when being evicted or when their Section 8 is threatened. Without legal help, a tenant can lose their rental housing in less than 3 weeks. This rapid time-frame makes it virtually impossible for them to

locate alternate housing, forcing them into homelessness. In addition, without legal advocacy, evicted families can wind up with substantial monetary judgments for landlord attorney fees, and evictions “on their record.” These obstacles make it even more challenging for them to locate new housing.

Legal Aid currently assists over 550 individuals and families with eviction services annually. **Sixty-five percent (65%) of our clients come from Santa Rosa**, yet we receive no funding from the city to provide these services. Due to stretched resources (we are not funded for any staff housing attorneys and thus must rely entirely on two volunteers), these vital eviction services are very precarious. ***Paid attorney staff for our housing program is essential to maintaining and sustaining this service.***

## **TARGET POPULATION**

This project will target low-income tenants. Special efforts will be made to reach out to Spanish-speaking tenants and tenants residing in areas known to live in areas that have a higher incidence of substandard housing.

## **SERVICES**

Tenant legal services will include legal education, negotiations with landlords, preparation of pleadings and other written documents, and when necessary, full legal representation. Legal matters addressed will include eviction defense, Section 8 terminations, and habitability retaliation and discrimination issues. Services will principally be provided by a housing attorney and bilingual legal caseworker. Legal Aid will also leverage nearly 3,000 intern and volunteer hours.

## **OUTCOMES**

Through this project, Legal Aid will provide tenant legal services to 400 low-income tenants. Unlawful evictions, including those in violation of the ADA, will be stopped. Legal Aid will also assist ***100 tenants with issues related to the habitability***, of their rental units. Assistance will include obtaining repairs or monetary compensation for substandard housing whenever possible, including relocation costs. ***This is a new service.*** Four hundred (400) tenants will receive legal education about their rights as a result of ***proactive tenant outreach.***

Investing in legal services for tenants makes good economic sense. It is the most cost-effective tenant protection method currently available to the County. Investing in tenant legal services is a widely recognized best practice for cities and counties struggling with the rental housing issues we face in Sonoma County. **Cities like Boston and New York, recognized savings of over \$750,000 annually in averted social service costs by investing in tenant**

**legal services.** Legal Aid's own Social Return on Investment study revealed that our housing program resulted in over \$200,000 in direct immediate benefits and over \$960,000 in long-term benefits to Sonoma County in 2013.

We need additional tenant protection laws in Sonoma County, but we also desperately need to help tenants enforce the laws that already do exist to protect them.