



LOS ANGELES

# Daily Journal

## Tenants Need Your Help Now

*I slept and dreamt that life was joy.  
I awoke and saw that life was service.  
I acted and behold, service was joy.*

-RABINDRANATH TAGORE

By Adam Murray

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There are few things more joyful than keeping a family from being illegally evicted from their home. Attorneys at legal services organizations routinely see: landlords evicting tenants for daring to complain about the conditions of their apartments; banks evicting tenants from apartment buildings that have been foreclosed upon; and tenants in danger of losing the homes where they have lived for decades because a single rent payment was late or got lost in the mail.

The lawyers who represent these tenants keep families from becoming homeless. They keep children in the only homes that they have ever known. As the attorneys who do this work will tell you, they receive immeasurable joy from serving as counsel in these cases. The problem is that there are not enough attorneys doing this work. The organization I head, Inner City Law Center, is expanding our capacity to involve pro bono counsel with eviction cases. My hope is that some of you reading this article will decide to

take on an eviction case.

In Los Angeles, the vast majority of tenants in eviction cases are not represented by legal counsel. A 1998 study of 400 eviction cases in Los Angeles found tenants were represented by attorneys in only 11 cases (2.8 percent). Landlords, in contrast, were represented in 290 of those 400 cases (72.5 percent). Having a lawyer represent you makes all the difference. Without a lawyer, tenants are almost always evicted. A study by Professor Gary Blasi of UCLA Law School followed 150 tenants who did not have lawyers, and found none of them won at trial. Another study found that tenants who are represented by counsel are actually more likely than landlords to favorably settle their case or to win at trial.

Like most legal services organizations, Inner City Law Center has been inundated with clients over the past 18 months. Each of our projects has seen an explosion in demand: more homeless veterans are needing help applying for benefits; more landlords are failing to comply with health and safety codes; more families are being evicted; and many more people are living one crisis away from homelessness.

There is an increasing awareness that it is more effective, more humane, and usually cheaper to tackle these problems early rather than

letting them fester. Nowhere is this trend more evident than in the burgeoning discussion of Homelessness Prevention, which asks, "How can we keep people in their homes, rather than waiting and dealing with issues after people become homeless?" There are a number of promising new programs that try to answer this question. For example, California recently passed a bill to create a six-year "Civil Gideon" pilot project that will experiment with providing access to free legal representation in certain eviction and family law cases.

Another promising and innovative program has just started this month in Los Angeles. Inner City Law Center, the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, and Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County have launched a groundbreaking new Homeless Prevention Program that assists low-income families in danger of eviction. The program represents tenants in rental housing who have lost their jobs, had their salaries cut, lost their health insurance, or face other financial difficulties that put them at risk of homelessness. The program will assist these low-income families much more holistically than legal services organizations have traditionally been able to do. In addition to offering legal assistance to prevent evictions, we will be partnering



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Economics for Women, whose social workers will provide job training and placement counseling, financial and budget counseling, and eligibility assessment for health care and other benefits. This three-year, \$10 million program, paid for from a grant awarded by the City of Los Angeles from federal stimulus funds, is the first of its kind in Los Angeles. Hopefully it will provide a model for how service providers can work together to prevent homelessness.

Unfortunately, even with these new and innovative Homelessness Prevention programs, the need for legal representation greatly exceeds the resources of legal service organizations. Each year more than 70,000 eviction cases are filed in Los Angeles County alone - and this number does not include the majority of tenants who move out after receiving an eviction notice but before an eviction case is filed. Legal services organizations can only serve a small fraction of the tenants with meritorious defenses who need legal counsel.

To keep more people in their homes, we must find ways to increase the number of pro bono eviction counsel. This will require two things: (1) more private firm attorneys agreeing to provide pro bono representation to tenants in danger of losing their homes; and (2) increased capacity at legal service organizations to effectively utilize these legal resources.

As for the first, one of the few silver linings in the recent economic

downturn is that many law firms in town have excess legal capacity and are eager to help on these sorts of projects. Eviction cases are an easy sell for attorneys interested in pro bono work. They provide great experience and hands-on training and they offer incredibly rewarding work. With just a half-day training, a few days of legal work, a settlement conference, and (sometimes) a short trial, a pro bono attorney can literally keep a roof over people's heads.

The second requirement is more challenging. Pro bono attorneys are not "free" resources for legal services organizations. To effectively utilize pro bono attorneys, legal services organizations must: screen more cases; develop a network of interested attorneys; train these attorneys on the substantive law; coordinate placement of cases; and be available as an ongoing resource for clients or pro bono attorneys as questions arise. Many legal services organizations in town already have a dedicated pro bono coordinator who focuses full time on doing this work. A number of other legal services organizations have recently recognized the advantages of using more pro bono resources during these difficult economic times and are expanding internal capacity to coordinate this work.

Here at Inner City Law Center we already use pro bono counsel extensively in our slum housing and homeless veterans work. We also recently added an attorney whose primary job will be to expand our

use of pro bono counsel representing tenants in danger of losing their homes. If you are interested in experiencing the joy and satisfaction of helping a low-income family stay in their home, I encourage you to contact our new Pro Bono Director, Lorraine Lopez, at (213) 891-2880 x242.

**Adam Murray** is the executive director of Inner City Law Center in Los Angeles.