



**Catholic
COMMUNITY
Services**
OF KING COUNTY
FALL 2010

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- John O'Brien, Staff Attorney
- Patricia Duckstad, Staff Attorney
- Matt Stucky, Paralegal
- Katie Scifres, Administrator

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- Kathleen Pierce
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Please send questions, comments, ideas for stories, and other inquiries to Kate Snow:

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LEGAL ACTION CENTER UPDATE

From The Director Mark Chattin

Ron is a gay man who has lived a quiet private life at his apartment complex for several years. He was polite and friendly with his neighbors until one day a new family moved into the complex. Apparently threatened by Ron's orientation, they started a campaign to have him evicted from the premises. They convinced the on-site manager to issue a 20 day termination notice even though Ron still had a valid lease. Ron, who is also disabled, felt extremely stressed and unsure as to what his rights were. He contacted the Legal Action Center after getting a referral from the Housing Justice Project in Kent. Our attorney assured Ron that the landlord had no legal right to terminate his tenancy and contacted the management to inform them that their actions were illegal and discriminatory. Eventually the parties entered into a mutual termination agreement wherein Ron could move, keep his Section 8 eligibility and receive a full refund of his deposit. Ron reports that he is happy in his new complex and extremely grateful for the representation and support that he received from LAC.

The number of tenants seeking assistance from the Legal Action Center continues to grow. Unfortunately, so many of them are victims of the bad economy and either being evicted because they no longer have the income to pay their rent or their landlords are being foreclosed upon because of their inability to make their mortgage payments. During the brief period that Congress fought over the extension of unemployment benefits, LAC saw a substantial increase in the number of tenants being evicted because their benefits had lapsed. Nonetheless, LAC continues to provide representation to hundreds of households each year.

LAC was awarded a new contract with the City of Seattle that has stabilized our funding to a degree. LAC has continued to work with Express Advantage and the Express Credit Union and in the new year will begin trainings for tenants in transitional housing on financial literacy and landlord tenant rights and responsibilities. Despite these positive developments, funding is becoming a critical factor for the future operations at LAC. The Legal Foundation continues to experience a sharp reduction in funding available for the network of legal services they support. Other foundations are decreasing their grants and individual donations are stagnant at best while government funding is rapidly vanishing.

In order for the continuum of legal services to continue, the Campaign for Equal Justice needs your financial support. Enclosed you will find an envelope for donations to the Campaign. Please consider supporting the Campaign so that LAC and other programs can continue to provide assistance to some of the most vulnerable members of our community.

LAC Staff John O'Brien Receives President's Award

President's Awards have recently been presented to nine outstanding employees and supporters of Catholic Community Services and Catholic Housing Services. Michael Reichert, President of CCS and CHS, worked with agency and system directors in identifying individuals who have demonstrated extraordinary dedication to their clients and exemplify the mission of CCS and CHS. The President's Awards are inscribed with a quote from *Les Miserables*: To love another person is to see the face of God.

John O'Brien has represented CCS clients for over 10 years. He exemplifies Catholic Community Service's mission in his commitment to providing services to his clients despite all obstacles and barriers. Despite his formidable size, his stature pales in comparison to the size of his heart. His gruff New York City exterior cannot obscure the compassionate advocate that resides within. With John O'Brien, Catholic Community Services and the Legal Action Center has a champion of justice of whom we can all be proud.

From www.ccsww.org

Reflections of an Eviction Unit Intern

In a rush between tasks my supervising attorney asked me a question that answered itself, "We're kind of swamped today aren't we?" I smiled, nodded, and stepped into line at the fax machine. While the office is always busy, there are those days in the office that can only mean one thing. It's the time of the month that the landlords are starting to get out their eviction notices. The timing is not always predictable. But when it hits, you know it.

The work in the office tends to start with a phone call. The process of getting the tenant's information, stories, and legally significant facts often proves to be a humbling experience. However, the depth of gratitude reflected by the tenant who says "thanks for calling me back" while they are dealing with what may be one of the most important events in their life. I think this demonstrates the importance of the work done at the Legal Action Center. With all the service organizations in Seattle, the Legal Action Center is unique in that its mission is focused on responding to tenants in crisis.

The last six months as an intern at the Legal Action Center have been outstanding. I've learned about landlord-tenant law. The volunteers are amazing. The staff is thoughtful and committed. And I am proud of the work that I have gotten to do protecting the rights of tenants in King County.

By Craig Hay (3L at Seattle University School of Law)

New Faces at the LAC

After almost a year, the LAC has a new administrator! Katie Scifres has joined the staff after relocating from Texas. While completing her degree in Philosophy and International Studies, Katie created a database for a research center and maintained data for an educational website. She has transferred these skills to the management of LAC's newest data system.

LAC also welcomes Matt Stucky who comes to us as a Mennonite Volunteer. He will be working as a paralegal in the eviction unit for the next year and then will be off to law school at the University of Chicago. He comes to Seattle after residing in Kansas.

Bed Bugs on the Rise

The reports of bed bugs are on the rise all over the country including Seattle. The *Seattle Times* reports that extermination businesses have seen an increase in business as much as 70%. LAC has seen a dramatic increase in the number of tenants who are facing housing issues because of these bothersome pests.

One of the major issues with bed bug infestations in apartment buildings is establishing who is responsible for the extermination and lost property—the landlord or the tenant? This has become an increasingly more important issue as it often affects who takes financial responsibility for the costs. LAC has served multiple individuals who were facing eviction because the landlord was assessing the fees to the tenant even though there was no evidence to indicate that a particular tenant was responsible for the bugs.

Low-income tenants are not the only ones at risk. Reports of bed bugs at 5 star hotels and upscale businesses have also greatly increased in the last several months. Before traveling make sure to check your hotel at the following sites to learn about possible bed bug infestations: bedbugregistry.com and tripadvisor.com

Helping Tenants Advocate for Themselves

The Neighborhood Program at LAC recently had a client come in who had been having a rough go of it. The client, a single parent of two teenagers, could not get her manager to repair a toilet that had been flooding the bathroom for months. The moisture had started to create a serious mold problem in the bathroom in addition to the issues with the toilet not working. LAC staff contacted the property owner and had the toilet fixed within a week and a new manager working with the client. Using information that the client learned at LAC, she was able to negotiate a new lease paying \$3060 less than the year before because of all the trouble she had been through. LAC staff feel it is just as important to do direct representation of clients as it is to assist clients in advocating for themselves.

HUD Newsletter

For those of you interested in receiving a monthly update on housing issues around the northwest, check out HUD's website: <http://www.hud.gov/local/shared/working/r10/newsletters/hudhighlights.cfm?state=wa>

This link will provide you with all past issues as well as the ability to sign up for future newsletters. HUD's newsletter is a great way to keep in touch with what is going on!

Cases in 2009

In 2009, the Legal Action Center opened 459 cases and spoke with countless more on the phone providing legal advice and referrals. Dozens of Neighborhood Clinics were held and eviction clients were seen at home, at LAC, and at the courthouse. None of this would have been possible without the support of our volunteers and contributors! We are so thankful for the time, money, and support that is provided by so many - especially in these difficult times.

LEGAL ACTION CENTER
100 23RD AVE SOUTH



Working Towards Prevention

In line with the Legal Action Center's mission, there is a new program in the works that will focus on improving tenant's financial literacy. The new program, *Equipping Tenants with the Tools to Succeed*, will start its work in transitional housing facilities and subsidized apartment buildings to help tenants understand potential barriers to obtaining permanent and stable housing. This will include evaluating and understanding credit reports and scores, working towards positive landlord references, and other basic financial literacy education for tenants.

In addition to providing information and education, the Legal Action Center will assist clients with disputing charges on credit reports and working towards resolving other credit issues in order to make them better candidates for stable housing.

By learning the rights and responsibilities they have under the RLTA and practical tips about the landlord/tenant relationship, LAC will be minimizing the possibilities of the households falling back into homelessness. In addition, financial literacy will assist these households in becoming financially stable and ultimately building assets.

This publication provides general legal information. It is not intended as a substitute for specific legal advice. This information is current as of the date of its printing, September 2010.