



TENANT RESOURCE CENTER

FOR HOUSING JUSTICE IN WISCONSIN

REAL LIFE, REAL SOLUTIONS • KEEPING FAMILIES SAFE IN THEIR HOMES • UNLOCKING THE DOORS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Monday, February 17, 2020

TESTIMONY OF MATT KOZLOWSKI, TENANT RESOURCE CENTER IN SUPPORT OF THE WISCONSIN OPPORTUNITY ACT

About Tenant Resource Center

The Tenant Resource Center is a nonprofit, membership organization dedicated to promoting positive relations between rental housing consumers (tenants) and providers (landlords) throughout Wisconsin. By providing information and referrals, education about rental rights and responsibilities, and access to conflict resolution, we empower the community to obtain and maintain quality affordable housing.

Our Programs

The Tenant Resource Center's programs can be divided into two categories: 1) Housing Programs and 2) Homelessness Prevention Programs.

Housing Programs

Housing Programs at the Tenant Resource Center are aimed at helping individuals and families facing homelessness get back into stable, affordable housing. These programs provide housing case management services to help clients navigate housing options, overcome housing barriers, and financial assistance in various forms. These programs include Rapid Re-Housing and Health and Housing (in partnership with UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health). In 2019, the Tenant Resource Center provided over \$200,000 of this type of assistance to our clients.

Prevention Programs

The main focus of the Tenant Resource Center is centered around keeping families safe in their homes through our prevention programs. These programs range from Eviction Prevention programs to Housing Counseling programs.

Our Eviction Prevention Clinic provides one-time financial assistance to help keep people in housing and case management services to assist those who are evicted with finding new housing and navigate services throughout Dane County. In 2019, the Tenant Resource Center received over 1,000 requests for financial assistance to prevent eviction totaling over \$1,000,000. The average request was roughly \$1,000 and this figure only continues to increase as households in Dane County continue to face harsh conditions and higher rent-burdens.

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Housing Counseling (Dane): 608-257-0006 | Housing Counseling (State): 877-238-RENT

En Español: (608) 257-0006 | Hmoob: (608) 257-0006

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One of the greatest challenges in our Eviction Prevention programs comes from the restrictions that are placed on eviction prevention financial assistance. Due to lacking HUD definitions surrounding homelessness (or at risk of homelessness), the restrictions on who qualifies for this type of financial assistance, and the large gap between the financial need that exists in our communities compared to the funding that is provided to address these issues, the need to prioritize (or triage) who receives financial assistance has grown significantly. Of the over \$1,000,000 in requests for assistance received by the Tenant Resource Center in 2019, the agency only had funding to provide roughly \$100,000 in financial assistance (less than 10% of the total requests).

Perhaps the most disturbing figure in all of this is the data that cannot be captured through eviction prevention programs: the number of people who are forced into homelessness prior to being able to request assistance. While over \$1,000,000 in requests for assistance from one agency in one county may sound like a large problem, it only captures a small percentage of the overall problem. Due to our presence at Dane County Court, we're able to witness first-hand the number of cases that are filed, but are either dismissed prior to the court date (likely due to an arranged move-out date with the landlord), or who lose through default judgement after they have left their housing but failed to show up to court. However, even this group fails to capture the scope of the problem, as an even greater number of households move out prior to having a court filing in order to avoid the burdens that come from having an eviction filing on their housing record.

Without significant increases in funding for these issues, including funding for case management services, this problem will only continue to grow as households in Wisconsin facing poverty continue to see higher costs of rent and lacking growth in wages and financial assistance.

Housing Counseling

The flagship program of the Tenant Resource Center is our Housing Counseling program which provides information and referrals to tenants and landlords about their rental rights and responsibilities. These services are available by walk-in at our offices, via phone, or through email. This program is designed to provide tenants and landlords with the basic information needed to solve the many real life problems that can occur in rental housing. Oftentimes, these problems stem from basic confusion about the rental laws, who should be responsible for various items, and how various processes function in rental housing (ending a lease, eviction, etc.). Previously, these services were available to all residents in the State of Wisconsin, however, after losing a grant from HUD and after ongoing increases in the demand for the service, we have been forced to reduce our service area to Dane County.

These services, among the many others provided by CAP agencies throughout the State of Wisconsin, are the first line of defense in preventing eviction and homelessness. Many times, evictions or other forms of housing displacement can be avoided through simple rental rights counseling to inform tenants and

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landlords of their rights and responsibilities. These issues range from disputes between neighbors, basic questions about who is responsible for repairs, and general confusion that results from the complexities within rental laws. Without basic housing counseling services, the only option for many tenants and smaller landlords is to turn to a private attorney, which comes at significant financial and logistical costs. Oftentimes, these cases simply require clarification on what the text of the law is, where it can be found, and what remedies exist within the statutes for these problems; all items that frequently don't require legal assistance or representation. Additionally, housing attorneys can often be difficult to locate in rural areas of the state and can be prohibitively expensive to those facing issues of poverty.

By providing real life solutions to tenants and landlords, we are often able to prevent issues from rising to the levels that lead to housing displacement and, ultimately, homelessness.

How the Wisconsin Opportunity Act Helps

Programs like ours described above are often the first and last line of defense in reducing poverty and the impact of poverty in communities throughout Wisconsin. Oftentimes, the programs that would be funded by the Act are the only option in rural communities throughout the state, meaning that funding cuts often result in entire areas losing this type of assistance. Through our Housing Counseling programs, we hear these stories first-hand from tenants and landlords throughout the state. It is all too often that when we return calls to those in need that we have to provide the hard news that there isn't a program in their area that can provide the services they need (or if there is, that funding has long since run out). Additional assistance for eviction prevention funding and other creative prevention solutions is the key to having an impact on these issues.

Because of these factors, and the need to expand anti-poverty programs throughout the state, I urge the passage of Senate Bill 467 and Assembly Bill 508.

Sincerely,

Matt Koz
Finance Director
Tenant Resource Center

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