

Austin Tenants Council Statement, April 10, 2018

I'm here to share with you a little about the programs at the tenants' council that are funded under the City's CDBG Action Plan, to thank you and Neighborhood Housing and Community Development for continuing to support our work, and to put a bug in your ear about some of the community needs and priorities that we're seeing.

Austin Tenants' Council is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization that has served Austin since 1973. We operate with the mission of promoting and advocating for safe, decent, fair, affordable housing. We currently serve about 8,000 tenants per year with direct counseling, mediations, advocacy, and resources.

Our CDBG-funded services are a program called the Renters' Rights Assistance Program which offers counseling services in our office, as well as home visits and repair mediation services. This program falls under the "Renter Assistance" priority in the Consolidated Plan: "Renter Assistance provides assistance to renters so that rent is more affordable, provides tenants' rights services to equip renters with information that may allow them more stability and provides financial assistance for necessary rehabilitation to make homes accessible."

The Renters' Rights Assistance Program provides counseling and mediation services to income-qualified (<80% MFI) City of Austin residents. We see more than 500 clients per year for one-on-one counseling in our office. Tenants come to discuss a wide variety of issues-- everything from eviction notices to security deposits to bedbugs to late fees to utility charges. Clients typically spend about 30 minutes meeting with a counselor, during which time the two discuss the issues and the counselor can advise on relevant rights the tenant may be able to assert, and explain the process involved. Generally, tenants leave the office equipped to handle their housing issue on their own, using the information and resources provided by the counselor and following the plan that the two made together. At times, the client will seek additional guidance to follow up after the appointment, and often the counselor will support the client by helping them prepare letters, records, or other documentation for the next step. Clients who need legal advice, homelessness case management or housing placement, or any other more complicated guidance are referred to partner agencies.

In addition to the on-site counseling services, the Tenants' Council offers repair mediation assistance, for clients who are experiencing conditions in their rental housing that present a threat to their health and safety (examples of this might be deteriorating stairs, plumbing problems and the associated mold and rotted wood, pest infestation, broken AC units). Often, clients will come to us for help after already trying and failing to compel their landlord to make the repair-- but it is also common for them to involve us at the beginning of the process because they are fearful of landlord retaliation and they want an advocate involved. We visit their home and document the issue, and then we work with the landlord, Code department, and others to sort through and resolve the issues in accordance with the law. This program is especially rewarding because we believe we are having a systemic impact on substandard housing-- our work helps preserve affordable housing in decent condition, and for tenants who live in a multi-unit housing we generally will have motivated improvements that benefit more than just our individual client. It's also one of our more challenging programs, because Texas law is not terribly friendly to tenants, affordable housing is so limited, and often our clients are (rightly) fearful of making trouble or extra cost for the landlord, of getting authorities like the Code department directly involved. This is a small program with a very powerful impact and we're very proud to be able to offer it under the City's CDBG action plan.

We are very grateful to have been funded to offer these services, and thank you for your continued support. It should be noted that we have been offering these programs with level funding for over ten years, in spite of the significant changes in Austin over that time-- in the last decade we have seen Austin's population grow significantly and remain majority renters, we've seen the housing vacancy rate drop, and we've seen rents skyrocket with 36% of Travis County households currently rent burdened (spending more than a third of their income on housing). Despite those pressures, we've been offering these programs and services on the same small budget for more than ten years. We know the CDBG funding is stretched very thin already, and that the proposed federal budget eliminates it altogether. We wanted to take this time to tell you how appreciative we are for the funding we've received thus far, and to let you know that we're committed to Austin continuing and expanding these important services in spite of these threats and limitations.

I also just wanted to quickly tell you about an area where we've identified a need for more funding, and to give you the price tag on those items because we're looking to fund those and I'm well aware those won't likely come out of CDBG funds-- but they do reflect needs we've identified in the CDBG-funded program.

We are currently talking to somewhere between 50 and 80 tenants a month who need help with the eviction process. We're observing a number of evictions that are preventable, with a little landlord mediation, or that are illegal because the landlord fails to provide proper notice-- but the tenant isn't aware enough of the process or their rights to dispute it. We're also seeing a huge number of clients who are being sued in eviction court and just don't have any idea how to navigate that process, prepare their documents, or who even know that they need to show up in court. We're currently serving these clients as part of the counseling services in this program, but we'd like to pull them out into a special service where they can have an advocate assigned, to help them prepare for JP court and go with them if they like. We believe that with a dedicated advocate, tenants will be better able to understand the process and navigate it, and hopefully better able to defend themselves against wrongful evictions or improper notice. At the least we believe it could make that court process go better and reduce the impact on tenants' future housing, at best we think we might be able to reduce the displacement and housing instability caused by evictions.