



Giving tenants a fighting chance against evictions

By Rowan Moore Gerety
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At the Stanley Mosk Courthouse in Los Angeles, if you don't have a lawyer, and most people here don't, you stand a 99 percent chance of getting kicked out of your apartment.

"When one's basic rights are on the line -- housing, healthcare, custody over one's child -- there is no right to a lawyer," Los Angeles city attorney Mike Feuer says.

As a state legislator, Feuer authored a bill to create the Shriver Housing Project. It's a pilot program offering lawyers to people facing life-altering cases in civil court. Feuer says it provides more justice, and it's more cost-effective, because having an attorney can actually help avoid a trial. Out of 2,500 cases the Shriver Housing Project has seen so far in LA, all but forty have been settled out of court.

Landlords like Richard Otterstrom say it's not worth taking an eviction case to trial. He says most start for a simple reason: "For non-payment of rent. And that's basically an automatic win for the landlord."

Shriver Project attorneys argue that "non-payment of rent" isn't always as simple as it seems. Lorensa Cardeno, 75, is a retired cleaning

woman. She's spent the last 17 years with her three birds in a studio apartment in Los Angeles. Her rent went up in May. Speaking in Spanish, Carbeno says, "I always pay before they ask for the rent."

But because Cardeno forgot to include that increase in her money order for May's rent, she was short \$17.55. And that was enough to earn her an eviction notice. "Where would I move, on my own?" she asks. "I think I would have ended up on the street."

Through the Shriver Housing Project, an attorney at the Inner City Law Center filed an answer to Cardeno's eviction notice. Her landlord dropped the case immediately. So she's still in her apartment. Which, she'll admit, isn't perfect. She figures she traps about one rat every month.

"All I want is for them to leave me at peace, and I'll go on killing rats," Cardeno says. And that's cheaper than providing emergency services to a 75-year-old living on the street. If it saves California money, the Shriver Housing Project hopes it will serve as a national model.



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A tenant faces the judge during an eviction hearing at Stanley Mosk Courthouse in Los Angeles.