ICLC Keeps Elderly Tenants Off the Streets

On a chilly morning in December, a landlord changed the locks on four elderly tenants’ doors and started throwing their possessions into a dumpster.

For months the landlord had been trying to force the tenants out. He had already cut off their electricity, water, and gas, refused to make needed repairs, and even threatened violence. The building had horrible living conditions. The walls were cracked and covered with mold, the paint was peeling. You could hear rats running through the walls. The tenants, two of whom are veterans, had lived in the building for years. They are the last residents on their block who were not USC students.

That December morning, ICLC received a call from our partners with Strategic Actions for a Just Economy who had been working closely with the tenants. ICLC lawyers rushed to the property and explained to the landlord’s attorney that the law did not allow him to forcibly lock out tenants. The attorney stormed off, refusing to give the tenants keys for the new locks. ICLC called LAPD to report the illegal lockout. After the police arrived, the landlord eventually agreed to let the tenants back into their homes and to provide them with keys.

But a few days later, the landlord filed eviction actions against each of the tenants. Although they had leases and receipts confirming that they had paid rent, the landlord claimed they were squatters with no tenancy rights. After extensive negotiations, in late January, the landlord eventually agreed to dismiss the eviction actions and pay relocation expenses so the tenants could move to a healthier building.

ICLC Expands Again!

Over the last five years, ICLC’s staff has doubled in size. On January 17, over 125 of our partners and supporters, including L.A. County Superior Court Presiding Judge Lee Smalley Edmon and L.A. City Councilwoman Jan Perry, joined us to cut the ribbon on the new wing of our Skid Row offices.

The expansion will enable us to provide legal services each year to an additional

- 700 clients facing eviction,
- 100 homeless veterans, and
- 120 low-income people living with HIV/AIDS

whom we otherwise would be unable to serve. This expansion also will help us better serve our existing clients as we have added eight private offices, six workstations and additional rooms to accommodate meetings with clients, volunteers and our community partners.

Single Family Home Converted Into 44 Illegal Units!

Inner City Law Center was approached by tenants living in squalid conditions not far from downtown. Their landlord had pulled permits to convert the home into three apartments. But instead, had converted the home into 44 units!

Rents were as high as $500 a month for tiny studio apartments with narrow corridors, broken furnaces, and malfunctioning smoke alarms. The electrical system was so poorly constructed that when one tenant switched on his lights, the smoke alarm outside his apartment would go off.
The landlord ran the building like his own personal fiefdom - walking into occupied apartments without knocking. His written property rules offered a $100 rent rebate for any tenant who referred an unmarried woman to be a new tenant! When tenants complained or requested repairs he ignored or harassed them. The building was a severe safety hazard. He even built an unpermitted third story, which could have collapsed causing severe injuries.

ICLC organizers helped tenants document their requests for repairs and to file complaints with various city agencies. Eventually, the city inspectors concluded that the conditions were so dangerous that the building needed to be vacated. At ICLC’s urging, the city ordered the landlord to pay the tenants’ relocation costs. The landlord refused and threatened to illegally evict the tenants, telling them that they would be left on the street with nothing.

ICLC worked closely with LA City Councilmember Jan Perry and the LA Housing Department to arrange for payment of over $300,000 in relocation costs so that the tenants could move out of the unsafe building and into new apartments. Because most of the tenants did not have bank accounts, ICLC arranged for a representative from City National Bank to be at the apartment building when the relocation checks arrived. As a result, not only did the tenants receive benefits averaging about $10,000 per unit, many tenants were able to deposit those checks into their first-ever bank accounts.

ICLC, along with our pro bono partners at Fulbright & Jaworski L.L.P., recently filed an affirmative habitability lawsuit against this landlord, seeking to hold him accountable for his illegal mistreatment of his tenants.

About Inner City Law Center

Inner City Law Center serves the poorest and most vulnerable in Los Angeles County. Founded on the basic principle that every person should always be treated with dignity and respect, ICLC, through its staff of 40 attorneys, advocates, tenant organizers, social workers, and other professionals, provides free legal representation and social service advocacy to thousands of homeless and working poor clients each year. As the only full-time provider of legal services headquartered on Skid Row, ICLC is widely recognized for its expertise in housing issues, as well as government and veterans benefits.

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