



Guide to Tenant Rights, Services & Resources



Solid Ground's
Tenant Services Hotline:

206.694.6767

Hotline hours: M, W, Th
10:30am – 4:30pm

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DISCLAIMER: Please note that the information in this booklet is not a substitute for legal advice on your specific situation. The laws are complex, and following these instructions won't guarantee a favorable result. Solid Ground Tenant Counselors are not attorneys, and this information should not be considered legal advice.

Tenant Services at Solid Ground



Our housing counseling program for tenants helps families and individuals maintain permanent and reliable rental housing. Our services provide tenants with the resources and tools they need to prevent eviction and ensure housing stability. While we do not have attorneys on staff and cannot provide legal advice, we *can* help you understand your rights and responsibilities as a renter.

Tenant counselors can provide information on:

- The Washington State Residential Landlord-Tenant Act and other laws impacting renters.
- How your rights can protect you as a renter.
- Tenant and landlord responsibilities.
- Laws and strategies regarding rule changes, rent increases, repairs and deposits.
- Housing searches: where to look, how to apply and credit screening issues.
- What to do if you are a victim of discrimination, harassment or retaliation.
- The eviction process: timelines and procedures.

Solid Ground is located in Seattle, but we work with tenants throughout King County and across Washington State. Our housing counseling programs are certified through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and we provide all of our services free of charge.

Understanding Landlord-Tenant Laws

Washington State laws governing residential tenancies are detailed in **RCW (Revised Code of Washington) 59.18, the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act**. Tenants within the City of Seattle have additional protections under Seattle Municipal Codes. Just as important as knowing the law is knowing how to use it to protect yourself as a renter. With a few exceptions, landlord-tenant laws are considered “self help” – that is, it is up to individual tenants to get their rights enforced. Unfortunately, there are no “landlord police” to call to report irresponsible landlords.

Tools for Tenants

Know your rights.

Landlord-Tenant laws can only help you if you understand them and know how to use them. Some landlords will take advantage of tenants who aren't fully informed about their legal protections. If you're unsure, do some research to get informed. Use the Solid Ground **Tenant Services Hotline** as a resource to learn your rights (206.694.6767, M, W & Th, 10:30am – 4:30pm) or visit our website's “**Housing Counseling**” section to read the laws: www.solid-ground.org/Programs/Housing/Tenants.



Document everything.

Always get it in writing! It is best practice to document all your communications with your landlord in writing, and get proof the communications were sent and received. Without written

documentation, every repair request or agreement between you and your landlord will come down to your word against theirs. In many places in the law, the tenant is actually not allowed a remedy until the request has been put in writing. A thorough paper trail will ensure you'll have the proof

you need to protect yourself if you end up needing to fight a disputed bill or take your landlord to small claims court.

It's up to you as a tenant to take proactive steps to ensure your landlord respects your rights.

Negotiate with your landlord.

Whether or not the law is on your side, it's useful to think of all of your interactions with the landlord as negotiation. It can be difficult to get what you want because in many situations the law is inadequate or vague. Landlord-tenant negotiations are by nature imbalanced because ultimately the landlord controls the property. Even when the laws are clear, it is still up to you as a tenant to get them enforced. Written negotiation is your way to communicate your rights and positions to the landlord.

Access resources.

There are organizations and institutions that tenants can sometimes use to gain leverage. For instance, you may be able to call local building code enforcement to follow up with your landlord to get necessary repairs made. You may also be able to take your landlord to Small Claims Court to collect money owed to you. See the **“Resources for Renters”** section of this booklet (pp. 10-11) for a detailed list.

Best Practices & Tips for Renters

Document all communications with your landlord in writing.

- *All repair requests must be in writing (RCW 59.18.070).*
- Always keep a copy of your correspondence with the landlord, and be sure to get copies of all documents that you sign.
- You can prove that the letter was sent and received by sending it **“Certified Mail Return Receipt”** or asking your landlord to sign and date your copy of the letter. You can also ask a reliable person to witness your delivery of the notice to the landlord.
- Document all agreements between you and your landlord and any commitments your landlord makes to you, especially payment arrangements. All agreements should be signed by both you and your landlord.

Always get receipts for money you pay to your landlord.

- State law requires landlords to provide tenants with receipts for rent (or any payment) if they are requested (**RCW 59.18.063**). You can also document payments by making a photocopy of the check or money order before you send it to the landlord, and sending it with a letter stating the amount paid.
- Whenever possible, pay using money orders or cashier’s checks instead of cash, and make copies of the money order after it’s filled out but before it’s separated from the stub.
- You can mark checks and money orders **“For April [or**

appropriate month] Rent in Full Only.” This documents that your payment can only be used for rent in the proper month and not for other fees.

Do not withhold rent if the landlord is not making repairs.

Tenants must be current in rent in order to access the repair remedies written into the law. Even if the repairs are extremely severe, withholding rent can leave renters vulnerable to eviction. For more information on your rights to get repairs made, go to www.walawhelp.org or Solid Ground's Tenant Services webpage: www.solid-ground.org/Programs/Housing/Tenants.

Document the condition of your unit when you move in & move out.

- You can defend yourself against wrongful damage charges after you move out by thoroughly documenting the unit's condition when you first move in, and when you vacate. The landlord is required to provide a move-in checklist. Fill it out thoroughly as this will be the primary document that protects you from being charged for pre-existing damages.
- Take detailed photographs of the unit's condition. Include a copy of the day's newspaper visible in each frame to prove the date the photo was taken. (Small claims court judges may not accept camera date stamps as documentation because they can be tampered with.)
- Landlords are not required to do move out inspections. However, you may ask the landlord to walk through the unit with you upon move out and provide you with a copy of the signed inspection report at the end.
- Be sure to leave your forwarding address with the landlord when you vacate.

Eviction always requires a court process.

- *Verbal eviction notices are not valid.* All notices must be in writing and follow a specific legal process (**RCW 59.12**).
- *Lockouts are illegal (RCW 59.18.290).* Call the police if your landlord has locked you out of your unit or removed your belongings without going through a court process.

Protect yourself by verifying when you move out of a unit.

- To vacate a unit in a month-to-month rental agreement, the landlord must *receive written notice* from the tenant *20 days prior to the end of the rental period (RCW 59.18.200)*. For example, the landlord must receive written notice by the 10th of the month if you want to vacate on the 30th of the month.
- You must vacate your unit by the end of the month that you gave notice. If you stay even one day past the vacate date, the landlord can legally charge you for the entire following month's rent. The landlord is not obligated to prorate your rent upon move out, but you may be able to negotiate with him/her to get the rent prorated. Remember, get it in writing!

Landlords can only enforce rules written in the lease.

- Landlords cannot legally enforce any terms other than the ones written in your lease.
- The landlord cannot legally change the rules of tenancy while you're on a lease for a specified term. Terms and conditions of the lease can only be changed by mutual agreement of landlord and tenant. Once your tenancy becomes month-to-month, your landlord can change the

rules (including a rent increase) by giving you 30 days written notice (**RCW 59.18.140**).

- ***Read the lease carefully before you sign it.*** The landlord can enforce any and all reasonable terms written in the contract as long as they don't contradict any state or local laws.
- No lease provision can waive your rights defined under the law (**RCW 59.18.230**).



There is no rent control in Washington State.

Once your lease term has ended, there are virtually no restrictions on how much your landlord can raise your rent. All rent increases require 30 days written notice. However, Seattle tenants are entitled to 60 days written notice of a rent increase if it is above 10% in a 12-month period (**SMC 7.24**).

All Seattle tenants have Just Cause eviction protection.

- Seattle landlords must have a Just Cause reason to evict you from a property (**SMC 22.206**). Just Cause evictions include nonpayment of rent, noncompliance with lease terms, chronically late rent payments, property sale, and the landlord wishing to occupy the unit themselves or move in a family member. The notice required for each Just Cause reason varies from 20-90 days.
- For a list of all Just Cause reasons and notice time frames, see www.seattle.gov/DPD/publications/CAM/cam610.pdf.
- Outside of Seattle city limits, landlords can ask tenants not protected by term leases to vacate with only 20 days notice.

Domestic violence survivors have additional protections under the law.

Domestic violence survivors cannot be discriminated against because of their status as survivors, or because of damage perpetrators cause to the units survivors live in. Survivors also have the right to legally break their lease to escape an abuser. In addition, landlords cannot refuse to rent to you because of your status as a domestic violence survivor. For more information, see www.metrokc.gov/dias/ocre/DV-Engl.pdf.

Prioritize paying rent above other expenses.

Housing loss makes it virtually impossible to maintain stability in other areas of life. Don't take any chances with your housing! Document every payment and communication with your landlord to protect yourself against housing loss.

Let lawmakers know how the laws need to improve in order to protect renters.

Your elected officials need to know how renters are being impacted by rental laws in Washington State. Call the **Washington State Legislative Hotline** at **1.800.562.6000** and tell them your story!

You can leave a message for your state Senator, two Representatives and the Governor. Also you can find email addresses and information about upcoming bills that impact renters at www.leg.wa.gov.



Rental Assistance Resources

If you cannot pay your rent...

Contact your landlord as soon as you realize you may not be able to pay your rent. Clear communication is essential. Let your landlord know that while you may not be able to pay on time, you are looking for help. Ask if he or she will accept partial payments until the rent is paid in full – and write out a payment plan that you can afford.

Where to turn...

Start by calling the **Community Information Line (CIL)** at **206.461.3200** or **1.800.621.4636** (or **2.1.1** from a landline). You'll be asked to explain your situation and give your address and zip code for referrals to agencies serving the area where you live. CIL staff will tell you about agencies that can help with rental and move-in costs. They can also refer you to other resources such as financial education classes.

Next steps...

- **Do not wait to call** once the Community Information Line gives you referrals. You may need to call a number more than once – or call back at a specific date and time – to get an answer.
- **Be clear about what help you need** when calling agencies for assistance. Explain what happened that put you at risk of losing your housing. For example: *“I lost my job last month, but I’m starting a new job in a week. I need help with this month’s rent.”* Most rental assistance programs will expect you to have income to pay rent. If you do not, the CIL will help you find resources to assist you. If you have children, ask for the number of the closest DSHS office.

- **Be prepared** if you are given an appointment with an agency to apply for rental assistance. Bring paperwork documenting what you owe, income verification, your lease and your landlord's contact information. Some programs will have you create a budget or set goals to help you stabilize your housing.
- **Try to stay calm and patient.** The process can be frustrating. Be organized and politely persistent to find the help you need.

Resources for Renters

Community Information Line: 2.1.1 or 1.800.621.4636, www.crisisclinic.org. Clearinghouse for all community resources, including rental assistance and low-income housing.

Tenants Union: *Tenants Rights Hotline:* 206.723.0500
 Tenant Counselors offer information and tools to help renters solve housing problems.

City of Seattle Department of Planning & Development: 206.615.0808. Code Enforcement Inspectors respond to tenant complaints regarding housing conditions and permits.

King County Dispute Resolution Center: 206.443.9603. Trained mediators can assist tenants and landlords in resolving conflicts.

King County Office of Civil Rights: 206.296.7592. Enforces civil rights law/protections and investigates discrimination complaints for the unincorporated areas of King County.

Housing Justice Project: 206.267.7090. Walk-in legal information and assistance. Priority service for renters facing evictions. Open M-F, 8-10:30am in the King County Courthouse in Seattle and Kent Regional Justice Center. Seattle location also open M & Th, 4-6pm.

Legal Action Center: 206.324.6890. Legal advice for renters with low incomes facing eviction, repair problems, deposit loss, subsidy termination, lockouts and other issues.

Washington Law Help: www.washingtonlawhelp.org. Online self-help legal information for renters, including detailed packets on

repairs, deposits, small claims court, and the eviction process.

King County Bar Association:

206.267.7010, www.kcba.org

Lawyer referral service.

CLEAR Line Legal Help: 888.201.1014

Free legal help and assistance for Washington State residents with low incomes living outside King County.

Open M-F, 9:15am-12:15pm.

CLEAR*Senior Legal Help: 888.387.7111

Free legal help and assistance for persons over 60 years of age of all income levels.

Neighborhood Legal Clinics (NLC): 206.267.7070

Located across King County, NLC attorneys can provide a free half hour of legal advice to renters, regardless of income.

Northwest Justice Project: 206.464.1519

Legal help for tenants in public housing or with Section 8 vouchers facing subsidy termination or eviction.

Attorney General Mobile Home Dispute Resolution: 866.924.6458

Assistance for owners of mobile homes and manufactured housing to resolve disputes with landlords.

Washington State Human Rights Commission: 800.233.3247

Enforces the law against discrimination and investigates complaints regarding civil rights violations.

Seattle Office for Civil Rights: 206.684.4500

Enforces civil rights protections and investigates discrimination complaints for Seattle residents.

Fair Housing Center of Washington: 888.766.8800

Provides support and education for renters filing discrimination complaints or requesting reasonable accommodations from their landlords.

King County Property Tax Assessor Parcel Viewer: 206.296.3850,

www.kingcounty.gov/operations/GIS/PropResearch/ParcelViewer

Find a mailing address for your landlord by looking up the property in the Tax Assessor database.



Tenant Education Workshops

Solid Ground's Tenant Counselors are available in King County to offer educational workshops on Landlord-Tenant laws and other topics related to ensuring successful tenancies. Contact us if your group, organization or community would benefit from this training. If you have a group of 10 or more, contact us at 206.694.6700 or housingcounseling@solid-ground.org to schedule a workshop.

This guide was written and edited by staff of Solid Ground's Housing Counseling program. Our website's Housing Counseling section also offers a wealth of self-help guides and information for tenants. For additional copies of this guide or more information, please contact us or visit our website.

TENANT SERVICES HOTLINE: **206.694.6767**

WEB: solid-ground.org/Programs/Housing/Tenants



Housing Counseling
is a program of



We believe...

- Our community has the resources, will and ability to end poverty.
- All people have the right to food, shelter, social justice and opportunities.
- Racism perpetuates poverty. To end poverty, we must undo racism.

We believe that together, we can build a community free from poverty, prejudice and neglect in which all members stand on Solid Ground with the skills and confidence needed to achieve their dreams.

MAILING ADDRESS

1501 North 45th Street, Seattle, WA 98103-6708

TENANT SERVICES HOTLINE

206.694.6767 (M,W & Th 10:30am – 4:30pm)

TTY

7.1.1

FAX

206.694.6795

WEB

solid-ground.org/Programs/Housing/Tenants

Reasonable accommodations for disabilities made on request.