



Tenant Empowerment Toolkit

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1331 H Street NW, Suite 350, Washington DC 20005

202-628-1161 [legalaiddc.org](https://www.legalaiddc.org)

Please Note

This guide contains legal information, **not** legal advice. Legal information is background information about your rights. Legal advice is advice from a lawyer about what to do in your own specific situation.

Contents

Section 1: Introduction	3
What is in this guide?	3
Section 2: The Basic Landlord-Tenant Law in DC	4
What are the reasons my landlord can evict me?	4
What are the reasons my landlord can't evict me?	4
What is the eviction process?	4
Section 3: Conditions Issues.....	5
What are the property sanitation requirements?	5
What should I do if my landlord ignores repairs and pest infestations?	5
Section 4: Strength in Numbers.....	7
Why should I organize with my neighbors?	7
What is a tenant association?	7
What can my tenant association do?	7
I've heard about buildings going on "rent strike." What does that mean?	7
How do I form a tenant association?	8
How can I make sure our tenant association is successful?	9
Can my landlord interfere with our tenant association?	9
Section 5: Templates	10

Section 1: Introduction

What is in this guide?

Legal Aid DC created this guide to give tenants in the District of Columbia the knowledge and power to exercise their housing rights. We hope this guide will help you:

- Understand the law and your rights
- Understand what you can do when you have housing problems
- Organize with your neighbors
- Know when to contact a lawyer

This guide reviews tenants' rights and legal options as of September 10, 2026. The law may have changed by the time you use this guide. If you have questions about your situation, you should speak with an attorney.

Legal Aid offers free legal services to low-income D.C. residents. If you have a housing issue and you want legal assistance, you can learn how to apply for help at www.legalaiddc.org/help.

Section 2: The Basic Landlord-Tenant Law in DC

What are the reasons my landlord can evict me?

These reasons include:

- You are behind on rent
- You broke the lease in a serious way

What are the reasons my landlord can't evict me?

- Your lease is "expiring"
- Your landlord does not like you
- You asked for repairs to your home
- Your landlord is selling the property

What is the eviction process?

Even if the landlord believes they have legal grounds to evict you, you might have defenses. Even if you get a formal letter or notice, you do not need to leave.

If your landlord wants to kick you out, they must go to court to get permission from a judge. Remember, if your landlord has a lawyer, that lawyer is not hired to help you – that lawyer is helping the landlord.

If your landlord tries to get you to leave without going to court first, contact the Landlord and Tenant Legal Assistance Network (202-780-2575)! Here are examples of illegal evictions:

- Cutting the power
- Disconnecting the water
- Changing the locks
- Throwing your belongings into the street
- Threatening to call immigration

Section 3: Conditions Issues

What are the property sanitation requirements?

DC law requires landlords to keep properties in a safe and sanitary condition. Some common problems tenants face that a landlord is required to fix include:

- Mouse and roach infestation
- Doors and windows that do not lock properly
- Leaks
- No heat or hot water

What should I do if my landlord ignores repairs and pest infestations?

1. Take photos and videos.

These can help show your landlord exactly what the problem is. They can also be your evidence in case the landlord does not make the repair. Save them or back them up online.

2. Send the photos and videos you took to your landlord along with a written request that the landlord make the repair.

It's harder for a landlord to ignore a photo than it is for them to ignore your calls.

A text message, email, formal letter, or a hand-written note are all good ways to tell your landlord about the problem. Whatever method you choose, keep a copy for yourself by saving the text message or email, photocopying the letter, or taking a photo of the note before you deliver it.

There is a sample letter and checklist of potential problems included in this packet in [Section 5](#). You can use this as an example, or fill it out and give a copy to your landlord.

3. If your landlord does not respond to the problem, call DOB

DOB (the Department of Buildings) is a DC government agency that inspects buildings and homes for housing code violations. If DOB finds a violation, they are supposed to send a written notice to your landlord. DOB may also fine your landlord for the violation. You can call (202) 671-3500 to request a free inspection.

Make sure to ask for the DOB inspector's report and hold onto your own copy. This may be useful evidence to you later, if your landlord still does not make the repairs.

4. If that doesn't work, you can file a case in the Housing Conditions Calendar of the DC Superior Court.

The DC Superior Court has a special section of the court called the Housing Conditions Calendar. This part of the court is for tenants who want to take their landlords to court for not

making repairs. The most you can get from filing this type of case is getting the landlord to make repairs – you cannot get money for damages in a Housing Conditions Calendar case.

5. Talk with your neighbors and see if there is a collective solution.

There can be strength in numbers. If your landlord is not making repairs to your home, they are probably not making repairs to your neighbors' homes either.

Talking to your neighbors is a great way to build your own confidence and share what you know about your rights as tenants. If you and your neighbors decide to all follow the same strategy (such as all calling DOB or, all filing cases in the Housing Conditions Calendar), the impact of your actions can be much bigger than if one person acts alone.

Section 4: Strength in Numbers

Why should I organize with my neighbors?

Do you need repairs done, but your landlord ignores your requests? Have you received threatening letters from your management company? Do you have other concerns about the safety and comfort of your home?

You probably aren't alone. Your neighbors may be facing the same issues. Organizing a group of tenants to take action can:

- Pressure the landlord to respond to tenants' needs, even if the landlord doesn't respond to an individual tenant.
- Help tenants to exercise their rights while decreasing the burden of doing everything alone.
- Create a structure to quickly and collectively bring up issues in your building and pressure your landlord to be more responsive to your demands.

What is a tenant association?

A tenant association is group of tenants living at the same property who meet and discuss issues in their building to solve problems and achieve goals set by the group.

A tenant association does not need to be formally incorporated for most purposes. However, in order to exercise rights under the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA), a tenant association will need to formally incorporate.

What can my tenant association do?

A tenant association can focus on whatever its members want to focus on. If your landlord is selling the building, tenants might want to organize to exercise rights related to residential building sales. If there are building-wide conditions problems, tenants might want to organize to try to get repairs made. Tenant associations give you and your neighbors a space to identify commons goals and strategize how to achieve them.

I've heard about buildings going on "rent strike." What does that mean?

A rent strike is when tenants at a building work together and decide to withhold (not pay) rent to the landlord. Rent strikes pressure the landlord to make repairs or take some other action. Often,

rent strikes are coordinated by tenant associations with the help of experienced, professional organizers.

Effective rent strikes require:

- Planning and cooperation. Tenants should decide how they will set aside their rent in a safe place, such as an escrow account. Tenants also must work together to decide when to end the strike.
- An understanding of the risks. If tenants don't pay rent, the landlord may take tenants to court, and that can be bad for a person's credit and for trying to rent a home in the future. If you miss a court date or lose your case, you could be evicted.

How do I form a tenant association?

1. Identify a problem.

Tenants can organize around many kinds of issues. Are there conditions issues or housing code violations in your unit? Have you gotten a threatening letter from your landlord? Are there problems in the common areas of your building?

2. Talk to your neighbors.

Ask your neighbors if they are having similar experiences. If there are neighbors you don't know or speak with often, knock on their doors or leave a note asking them how they feel about the job the landlord is doing. If you share your own experience first, it may make your neighbor more likely to share their experience.

3. Schedule meetings and invite everyone.

Put up fliers to get the word out! Try to get as many of your neighbors as possible to show up so that all voices are heard. Tell people what the meeting will be about, so they know what to expect.

If you have questions about your rights as tenants, call Legal Aid DC at 202-628-1161. We may be able to find a group that will present a "Know Your Rights" session for you and other tenants.

4. At the meeting, discuss, listen, set goals, and take notes.

- Have a sign-in sheet (or note who attends if you're on a video call) for the meeting so you know who participated and how to contact them.
- Identify common issues that you and your neighbors are having, and brainstorm ways to get your landlord to take needed action. Would it help to write a letter with a list of demands and have many tenants sign? Are there improvements that you and your neighbors would like made to the building? Speak up, listen, and work with one another to set goals and determine your group's priorities.
- Take notes to remember what was said and so that people who couldn't attend can know what happened.

5. Take it to the next level.

Formalize the tenant association. Once you begin working together to make improvements in your building, it might be helpful to set ground rules for how you'd like meetings to run to make sure that everyone's voice is heard. It can be helpful to get volunteers to work on specific goals or tasks and establish clear membership criteria.

How can I make sure our tenant association is successful?

It takes hard work to identify common goals and stay unified in your work with your neighbors. Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- Focus on building-wide issues. Accept that, while differences will arise, they do not have to divide. Landlords or management may try to use any divisions or differences between you and your neighbors to weaken your association.
- Set rules that allow you to make decisions while ensuring that every voice is heard. You may want to share an agenda before every meeting, take turns speaking, make decisions by majority vote, or elect officers or a board with the power to act on behalf of the association. Writing these rules down can make sure that they are followed and not forgotten.

Can my landlord interfere with our tenant association?

Remember, your landlord is not allowed to interfere with or stop tenants from organizing. Your landlord cannot:

- Lock you out of your community areas or tell you you're not allowed to meet in common spaces
- Ask you to stop knocking on doors
- Remove or prohibit posting flyers

If your landlord is getting in the way of your tenant association, ask your landlord to stop. A written request can be helpful so that there is a clear record of what happened. If they keep interfering, keep records of conversations, phone calls, emails, texts, photos or videos as evidence, and contact professional organizers.

Section 5: Templates

Housing Code Violations Letter

LANDLORD

ADDRESS

Washington, DC ZIP

DATE

Dear LANDLORD:

I am a tenant at ADDRESS. I have several problems in my home, and these problems are violations of the D.C. Housing Code. I am giving you a list of these problems. I am also giving you pictures I took of the problems.

Please contact me at PHONE NUMBER/EMAIL ADDRESS to set up a time to inspect my home and make sure these repairs are addressed.

TENANT NAME

Regards,

TENANT

ADDRESS

Washington,

DC ZIP

Checklist of Housing Problems

Date: _____

Heating

- ☐ Does not turn on/off (circle which one) ☐ Is inadequate
- ☐ Parts of heating system are missing/broken (explain)_____
- ☐ Problem with vents (explain)_____
- ☐ Other: _____

Cooling/Air Conditioning

- ☐ Does not turn on/off (circle which one) ☐ Is inadequate
- ☐ Parts of A/C unit are missing/broken (explain)_____
- ☐ Problem with vents (explain)_____
- ☐ Other: _____

Electricity

- ☐ Goes out ☐ Is dangerous (explain)_____
- ☐ Does not turn on (in the following rooms)_____
- ☐ Broken outlets (in the following rooms) _____
- ☐ Other: _____

Plumbing

- ☐ Low water pressure ☐ Dripping faucet(s)
- ☐ Running toilet(s) ☐ Clogged sink/tub/toilet (circle which one(s))
- ☐ No hot water ☐ Slow draining sink/tub/toilet (circle which one(s))
- ☐ Other: _____

Pests

- ☐ Rats/Mice/Rodents (circle which one(s)) ☐ Cockroaches
- ☐ Bed bugs ☐ Other: _____

Water Damage/Mold

- ☐ Water damage/stains (in the following rooms): _____
- ☐ Mold/mildew ☐ Active water leak(s) (explain): _____
- ☐ Other: _____

Windows

- ☐ Do not open/close properly ☐ Let air in/are drafty
- ☐ Have holes/gaps
- ☐ Have torn/missing window screen (in the following rooms): _____
- ☐ Other: _____

Walls/Ceiling

☐ Cracked, bubbling, peeling paint (circle which one(s) in the following rooms):

☐ Cracked, bubbling, peeling, crumbling plaster (circle which one(s) in the following rooms):

☐ Sagging ceiling (in the following rooms): _____

☐ Leak in ceiling (in the following rooms): _____

☐ Ceiling has caved in (in the following rooms): _____

☐ Other: _____

Doors

☐ Missing/broken/defective hardware (circle which one(s))

☐ Off hinges/tracks

☐ Does not open/shut properly (circle which one(s) in the following rooms):

☐ Does not lock properly (in the following rooms):

☐ Front/back door not sufficiently weatherproofed (have gaps that let light/air in)

☐ Other: _____

Flooring

☐ Missing/broken/chipped floor tiles (circle which one(s))

☐ Water damage on floor tiles ☐ Have holes/gaps ☐ Missing/broken thresholds

☐ Subflooring exposed ☐ Carpet needs to be replaced

☐ Other: _____

Appliances

The following appliances do not work/are broken:

☐ Refrigerator ☐ Freezer ☐ Stove top burners ☐ Kitchen sink/faucet

☐ Range hood above stove ☐ Oven ☐ Microwave ☐ Dishwasher

☐ Washing machine (In unit/building-wide) ☐ Dryer (In unit/building-wide)

Exterior/Building-wide

☐ Front door is broken ☐ Front door does not lock ☐ Broken elevator

☐ Missing pieces of door/door off of hinges ☐ Missing/broken door knob

☐ Front door does not fit in door frame ☐ Missing/broken steps/stairs

☐ Missing/broken roof tiles ☐ Water damage/leaks in roof explain)_____

☐ Exposed electrical wiring ☐ Problem with mailbox (explain)_____

☐ Other: _____