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Apartments

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On call

Thanks to hotlines, rental advice is at your fingertips

By Brian Edwards

Last night, somewhere in the city, a tenant was wondering why, two months after he had vacated his last apartment, he still hadn't received his security deposit back from his former landlord. Somewhere else, another tenant, who had spent the afternoon celebrating a job promotion and transfer, ended the day wondering how she was going to get out of her lease.

You need an objective opinion, but what can you do? Flip on the late-night TV and scan the upper end of the channel spectrum for a 1-900-LANDLORD number? Hey, George and Gorby have the red phone. The Caped Crusader has the Batphone. Crest toothpaste even has an 800 number to call if your teeth aren't getting white and bright enough. But what if you have got landlord problems? Who ya gonna call?

You can start by trying one of Chicago's two tenant hotline services, both based on the North Side, both under the direction of non-profit tenant groups and both (Listen up, suburban dwellers. These things can happen to you, too.) fielding calls from all over the Chicago area.

The hotlines, projects of the Lakeview Tenants Organization and the Rogers Park Tenant Committee, are separate entities, but their missions are roughly the same: to provide tenants and landlords with information about their respective rights.

So great, I'll call these guys up, tell them my story and they'll take my landlord to court, right? Well, not exactly.

Providing a push

"People think we've got a battery of attorneys working here," says Tom Greenan, coordinator



Tribune photo by Vai Mazzenga
Patti Broderick-Barakat, a Rogers Park Tenant Committee hotline volunteer, answers calls in both English and Spanish.

of the Lakeview Tenants Organization. "We can't offer advice. We simply inform them of the facts and try to motivate them to act on their own."

Using the Chicago Residential Landlord and Tenant Ordinance as a guide, hotline volunteers, who receive extensive training, offer information designed to settle landlord/tenant disputes in an efficient manner. And, although the ordinance doesn't apply to all buildings or to the suburbs, the organizations try to provide help to those tenants as

well.

So they'll tell me how to step all over my landlord and get my money without having to go to court, right? Well, not really.

"We're not out to get landlords," says Patti Broderick-Barakat, a Rogers Park hotline volunteer who answers calls in Spanish and English on Thursday evenings. As a commercial property manager and, here's a twist, landlord of a 13-unit building, Broderick-Barakat brings a unique perspective to her volunteer efforts. "We try to

promote good faith relations to resolve conflict," she says.

"There are some cry babies and whiners who'll call up," says Greenan, who agrees that getting along with your landlord is the best way to get things done, especially in the area of maintenance. "Ask him once in a pleasant manner, says Greenan, and, if that doesn't work, ask him again. If that still doesn't work, write him a note. And don't overload him at one time."

"If you've got an apartment full of maintenance problems, the landlord isn't going to fix them all at once," he says. Instead, Greenan advises that tenants take things one step at a time and build toward getting things fixed. "Right or wrong, you've got to understand where the landlord is coming from if you want problems solved," he says.

2 sides to the story

Greenan has heard all the stories from both sides. As coordinator of the Lakeview Tenant Hotline, which has 20 active hotline volunteers and recently graduated its first class of Spanish-speaking workers, Greenan likes to relate stories like the tale of "Four Strikes and You're Out."

A young woman called the Lakeview hotline after having received a five-day notice for non-payment of rent, even though she claimed to have paid the past due rent with a money order. When Greenan suggested she show the landlord the receipts, she said she'd misplaced them. Then get a copy of the bank original, or a copy of the canceled money order, Greenan offered. No, the woman said, the bank had no record either. Well, did you get a receipt from the landlord? Yes, said the woman, but that was misplaced, too. At that point, all a somewhat suspicious Greenan could say was, "Nice try and thanks for calling."

Or then there was the caller who wanted to break his lease because his apartment had been inundated by squirrels. Although the squirrels were not covered by the lease, the tenant was able to rid himself of the furry problem under the tenant ordinance's "repair and deduct" section, according to Karlene Mostek, an

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