

This local community organization wants to unionize tenants across Sonoma County

The move is part of a nationwide trend to challenge corporate landlords through collective organizing. | 



SLIDE 1 OF 2

Housing advocate Diana Kingsbury during a door-to-door outreach effort to inform tenants at The Grove Luxury Apartments complex about renters protections in the Just Cause ordinance in Petaluma, Calif., on Sunday, Sept. 11, 2022. (Erik Castro / For The Press Democrat)

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Editor's note: This is the second part of a two-part series looking at efforts to help low-income tenants unionize against corporate landlords. Read the first part [here](#).

With a lot of ground to cover on a hot Sunday afternoon, Diana Kingsbury switched between English and Spanish as she moved quickly from door to door at a large apartment complex on Petaluma's east side.

As a tenant organizer apprentice with the [Sonoma County Tenants Union](#), Kingsbury was canvassing for a [local just-cause ordinance under consideration by the city council](#) that would limit landlords' ability to evict. She encouraged tenants to show up for a city hall rally during the vote the next day.

Several people aren't home. Most of those who are took a flyer, open but noncommittal.

But for some others, Kingsbury's pitch about strengthening renter protections struck an immediate nerve. Tenants launched into complaints about the property manager or unreasonable fees for things like complex landscaping.

"They tried to raise my rent 20%," said Joseph Alvarez, a resident at the complex since late 2020, who added management only backed down after confronted with his research that such a rent hike was illegal.

“How many people have they done this to that can’t speak English or don’t know the law?”

Sonoma County Tenants Union was created in 2019 as the housing advocacy arm of the [North Bay Organizing Project](#), a coalition of local grassroots organizations.

“We got to a place where we recognized that the housing issue was going to be with us for a long time and that we needed to create a political home for tenants in Sonoma County,” said Chad Bolla, a tenant organizer and counselor with Sonoma County Tenants Union.

Central to the operation is a [hotline](#) where counselors provide free [tenants rights’ information](#), [supportive resources](#), legal aid referrals and other information to renters in need. It has a key focus on those most vulnerable to the housing crisis, like communities of color and low-income, undocumented and disabled renters.

The most frequent calls are about improper evictions and rent hikes, uninhabitable conditions and abusive managers, according to tenant counselors. Some have come from the Petaluma apartments where Kingsbury was canvassing.

But aside from providing mutual aid, the hotline serves as a way to identify problem apartment complexes and help organize at-risk tenants into de facto unions to assert their rights as a collective and build broader solidarity through a regional tenant network, the organization’s primary goal.

“The most effective way to make changes in their unit or on their site is to be an association or at least loosely speak to management en masse,” said Jeremy Hill, a Sonoma County Tenants Union hotline counselor and former board member. “Management will listen to a bunch of tenants together. They rarely listen to individuals on their own.”

In response to a pandemic that brought the precarity of worker protections, the magnitude of the housing crisis and the growing wealth gap into painfully sharp focus, tenant unions, [like labor unions](#), have [received](#) renewed attention and energy.

First, as COVID-19 took hold and now as protections expire, [hundreds of tenant unions have reportedly](#) formed, [from the Bay Area to Akron to Chicago to St. Petersburg](#), to [push back](#) against soaring rents, evictions, price hikes, deferred repairs or intolerable conditions.

Though less structured and legally protected than their labor counterparts, tenant unions are based on the similar principle that there is greater leverage in collective action when up against corporate power. It’s becomes an increasingly frequent circumstance as [mega property management companies and real estate investment firms buy up more and more of the rental market](#).

Under corporate control, [research](#) points to [a tendency](#) toward more [frequent eviction attempts](#) and cost-cutting measures that affect fees, amenities and proper maintenance.

2021 was a [record year for profit](#) for many corporate landlords.

While acknowledging residents’ rights to assemble and discuss problems, “tenant associations can’t really effectively bargain with a property owner on things like rent, rent debt and lease concessions because all of those factors vary with the individual tenant,” said Joshua Howard, executive vice president of local public affairs with the California Apartment Association. That’s a nonprofit trade group of small and large rental housing owners, managers and investors.

“Some of the issues that associations come together around are best handled when a landlord and tenant meet together individually, for instance, a maintenance issue in a unit,” he told me, adding that California law protects tenants in poor living conditions from eviction or retaliation if they take certain steps.

However, Margaret DeMatteo, housing policy attorney for [Legal Aid of Sonoma County](#), which collaborates with Sonoma County Tenants Union sees the power of “strength in numbers.”

“The fear of raising their voice when there are bad conditions and the fear of retaliation by the landlord ... I had to talk a lot of tenants out of that just to get them to assert basic rights,” DeMatteo, who worked as a tenant attorney for years, told me.

“When tenants talk to each other, they start to realize they’re not alone, and the more they come together, the more of a force they present. It’s a successful model, especially for meeting basic demands and shared habitability issues.”

The Sonoma County Tenants Union wants to be a driving force of the trend in the North Bay, where renters feel the intense pressure of limited housing at costs that far outpace wages.

Petaluma recently landed 30th on [a ranking of the top 100 cities](#) with the highest rents in July 2022, a more than 16% year-over-year change. Almost half the cities on the list came from California.

According to a [May report by the California Housing Partnership](#), tenants need to earn 2.3 times Petaluma's minimum wage to afford Sonoma County's average monthly asking rent, per a May 2022 report by the California Housing Partnership.

While some, especially individual, landlords [have taken a serious hit](#) through lost rental income and the out-of-whack economy, a housing affordability crisis that predated the pandemic has long left renters, especially low-income ones, in a particularly vulnerable position where the stakes are a literal roof over their head.

Tenants and owners alike struggle to understand the patchwork of overlapping, expiring and renewing rental laws. To push back against landlords in court is a daunting proposition, especially at a disadvantage as a monolingual Spanish speaker, for example, or without legal representation.

Free legal aid services are often overwhelmed, and something like [10% of renters are represented](#) in eviction cases compared to 90% of landlords.

"Legal aid is probably not going to save you. We're not here to save you. Only you getting together with each other can remedy the situation," Bolla told me. "Big real estate is influencing decisions all over the place, so all we have is numbers."

To encourage the process, Sonoma County Tenants Union trains volunteers to man the hotline, act as tenant counselors and canvas properties. If they get a hunch or multiple calls from the same place, staff will go door-knocking to gauge how widespread problems are and the appetite for tenants to organize.

From there, the organization will help tenants develop a structure, organize meetings and guide them through negotiating with management.

Staff recently helped a group of low-income seniors at the Copeland Creek complex in Rohnert Park form an association, agree on a list of grievances and secure meetings with the president of their property management company. Another association got an abusive on-site manager fired and regained access to a shuttered community room.

Even partial victories are concrete and meaningful. At one complex with limited parking where residents suffered high costs from aggressive vehicle towing, an official association hasn't come together.

But, residents did circulate a petition that garnered dozens of signatures. Suddenly, they got a notice from management that 10 visitor spots would be added. A hotline counselor had to translate the news, provided only in English, to the resident who'd headed up the efforts.

In general, progress is slow and uneven by organizers' own admittance. It's a labor-intensive endeavor that can lose steam or be met with resistance by renters just trying to get by.

Sonoma County Tenants Union is a small team dependent on volunteers. They can't always keep up with leads, but the idea is to at least plant seeds. The group has [public quarterly meetings](#) and hosts events with organizing experts and know-your-rights workshops.

"There's these sparks, and we act on them. We spend a lot of time, and if we're not able to get that fire blazing, there's another spark that pops over here, and so we tend to that," Bolla said. "But the goal is to stay connected to all those folks, because the energy will rise again."

In the meantime, that guiding principle of connection and community as the means to renter empowerment plays out in small ways again and again.

Hill, the current Sonoma County Tenants Union member and tenant counselor, learned through the organization that his own rent had been raised illegally. He banded with his neighbors and went to officials after pushback from his landlord, and they got refunded.

Alvarez, who was introduced to the Sonoma County Tenants Union when Kingsbury knocked on his door, showed up with his family, and even testified, at the rally the next day to support the just-cause eviction ordinance, which the [city council passed with some limits](#).

Alone, he hadn't known how to get the message out to all his neighbors about the illegal rent hike attempt he'd experienced. So, when Kingsbury showed up, he couldn't wait to get involved.

"It was like, 'I'm there,'" he told me.

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