

Know your rights: Library partners on housing rights workshops for renters and landlords]

Centre serves York Region, Peel and beyond

By Brock Weir

As we continue to experience a housing crunch, do you know your rights?

If you have any questions, they can soon be answered through a new three-part Housing Rights Workshop hosted by the Aurora Public Library and the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights, formerly the Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation.

Beginning on Thursday, February 2, and continuing on April 27 and June 1, the series will cover Rental Housing Basics, Beginning & Ending a Tenancy, and Repairs & Maintenance.

The series is funded through a grant received by the Centre via the United Way of Greater Toronto and, according to the Centre's Margaret Flynn, is intended to provide education sessions on tenant rights for both tenants and service providers, as well as service providers that might work with tenants.

"The goal of the sessions is to tell tenants about the main rights and the key rights that they have as a renter and where they can go in their community to get free help if they feel their rights have been violated," says Flynn.

The work of the Centre is multifaceted, says Flynn, covering a "range" of areas for people facing housing challenges, including housing stabilization programs where caseworkers help tenants who might be facing discrimination in their housing.

"We also engage in policy advocacy and strategic litigation to protect and also expand the rights of tenants," says Flynn. "We have this range of work that we do and because we have this direct contact with tenants through the intake line, we do then get a real sense of what some of the key issues are that people are facing. Certainly we hear about landlords making unlawful and discriminatory demands at the outset of a rental agreement. For example, asking for more than first and last month's rent up front, or for saying no children allowed.

"Another thing we do hear about relatively often is tenants thinking they have no rights because they don't have a written lease agreement. That is not the case. We also hear about landlords not meeting their obligation to maintain and repair the unit; for example, a landlord failing to eliminate mold or failing to deal with pests or to fix broken plumbing. We also hear about landlords illegally entering tenant apartments [and] landlords not providing 24 hours written notice in cases where they are required to do so."

Cases like these, she adds, are "aggravated" where there is a lesser supply of housing to address demand.

"I think that's a particular problem right now in areas where there is not a lot of housing options out there, we're seeing tenants pressured to, for example, pay more than that first and last month's rent and things like that, which is not a legal request. There are protections against that, yet it happens in areas especially where there's a lack of housing options.

"[These sessions] will be a time for [registrants] to submit questions throughout the presentation but the design of the presentations include scenarios that are true to life and really represent what tenants face in our communities and are based on the types of calls we get fairly often. Because it's scenario-based and people can think through what their reactions are to the scenarios, what they think might be wrong with them, and we'll reiterate what the key points are afterwards from the scenarios and what people might draw from them and apply for situations in their own life."

Sessions, Flynn adds, are accessible and engaging, and free of charge.

"We want you to be aware of what your rights are and where you can get free help if you think those rights are violated. Call us or

your legal clinic as soon as possible to talk through options. Nothing is too small or too early and it's always great to talk things through early on. Another big message to tenants is not to sign anything until they've made that call because they could be signing away rights that they have. Don't withhold your rent if something goes wrong because you could be putting yourself at risk for eviction. For more on the individual sessions and to register, visit the following:

Rental Housing Basics Thursday, February 21 12:30 ? 3:30pm Register at bit.ly/3TMOZlv

Beginning and Ending a Tenancy Thursday, April 27 12:30 ? 3:30pm

Register at bit.ly/3sGpaaM

Repairs and Maintenance Thursday, June 1 12:30 ? 3:30pm Register at bit.ly/3sDOHRJ

To connect with the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights, visit housingrightscanada.com or call 1-800-263-1139.