

Immigrant Support Task Group - Renter's Rights Advocacy Outcome Narrative

(Using white privilege to advocate for a Latina/o family that received a housing termination)

I called the family and introduced myself and stated that I was from Skagit Indivisible Immigrant Support Task Force. They were aware that I would be calling because Mary Sue had spoken to them as well as to Jose Ortiz. I asked if they would like me to meet them at the house for the inspection and whether they wanted me to be an observer only, or to speak up. The family wanted me to ask questions, challenge if necessary and advocate for their deposit and prorated rent. This was a good assignment for me because when I worked in the county attorney's office, I needed to know the law pertaining to crime victim's rights, ensure they were adhered to, challenge those in power when there was deviation and provide supportive advocacy.

The termination letter didn't indicate why this family was being evicted and when they went to the realtor to inquire, they reported being treated disrespectfully and even laughed at – no answers. The family believed that they were being evicted because they kept asking to have water leaks repaired as black mold was growing and they had concerns for their health. Apparently, when renting month to month, a reason for the termination notice does not have to be given – just 20-day notice. But the law does say that it can't be in retaliation for tenants asking for repairs to be made that fall under the law such as the ones stated above. However, as we know, some undocumented folks can't avail themselves of this law and often those that rent to them, know this. I'm not saying that this is true in this case or that anyone was undocumented.

On April 17, 2018, I met the family at the home that they received the termination notice attached to their door the day after their last complaint about the mold. I was handed a phone and Jose Ortiz introduced himself and we spoke for a few minutes regarding this matter. The family was told by Piazza Realty that the inspection tied to their \$2800 deposit, would be conducted between 11:00 – 2. How disrespectful. We stood outside, in and out of the rain, for two hours waiting for someone to show up. However, it did give us a chance to get to know one another, talk about racism/white privilege and for me to show them some of the tenant rights law that I brought with me.

The white realtor showed up and was very detached and shared no empathy, kind words or positive regard to the family or their situation. It felt like, 'did we do something wrong'? The family had not. The rent, as verified by the realtor, was always paid on time and stated that the rental unit was basically in the same shape as when they moved in – minus the mold. After her inspection, she asked if anyone had any questions. The family appeared hesitant to speak but did ask if they were going to get their deposit back. She responded by saying, I'll need to go back to the office and read the notes in the file first. There was silence. Doesn't the place look good? We took care of it and had it professionally cleaned. Yes, it basically looks the same as when you moved in. Any other questions? I said that I had one and introduced myself as from Skagit Indivisible Immigrant Support Task Force with a firm handshake while wearing my St. Louis County Attorney's Office jacket.

I stated that the family doesn't even know why they were evicted. They've been good neighbors, paid their rent on time and took care of the property as you can see. In fact, the termination notice was put in their door the day after asking again to have at least two water leaks repaired that were causing unhealthy black mold growth. I then reported that I spoke to the repair person that was working on the apartment and was told that the black mold on the backsplash behind the kitchen sink was caused by faulty installation of the dishwasher and garbage disposal that was put in prior to the family moving in – a missing plug causing water splashing up. This is important because they were afraid that they would be blamed for the mold. In fact, the realtor did ask regarding the mold in one of the bedrooms, do you have the heat on in this room? Rather than focusing on the leaky roof.

The realtor indicated that the law does not require a reason to be given for termination of a month to month contract. I stated that the law does say that the reason can't be retaliation for asking to get lawful repairs made like a leaky roof or black mold growth. I had the law visibly in my hand. At this point, I believe the family felt empowered and stated, we went down to your office and asked why we were told to move or else go to court and pay court costs. We didn't get an answer, instead, we were laughed at- it was humiliating. The realtor didn't respond. The family then stated that they felt they were told to leave because they asked to have repairs made that were bad for their health.

I then stated that since you are saying the unit is in the same shape as when they moved into it, they will get their deposit back, right? We can settle that right now, right? She stated yes, they will get their deposit back minus the fee for changing the locks per the contract. I asked how much this would cost and was told approximately \$120. I said, so they will get \$2800 minus the \$120 back. She said yes.

I then asked about prorated rent and was told that they wouldn't receive any of April's rent back because they didn't give 20-day notice per the contract. I asked if I could see the contract and was told it was out in her car. I asked if she could get it for me and she did. I pointed out that the contract states that either party can give 20-notice but in this case, it was you that gave notice so I'm not sure that it holds that this family has to also give notice. They did what you demanded and moved out without knowing the reason for the termination notice and by threat of court action. The realtor seemed confused and stated that I would need to take this up with her boss, Kathy Piazza.

I called Kathy the next day April 18th (per direction from the family) and introduced myself as from Skagit Indivisible Immigrant.....and I inquired about prorated rent. She stated that they wouldn't be entitled to prorated rent because the termination notice gave them until April 30th to vacate the premises so they owe through the 30th. I then made an argument that the family complied with the termination notice by moving out immediately as soon as something became available – that they were threatened with court action and not given a reason for being told to move - that they couldn't give 20-day notice in the time frame that they were given notice. I then said I don't know anyone's motives but it doesn't look good that they received the termination notice in their door the day after another request was made to deal with water

leaks and black mold. I informed her what the maintenance worker told me about the cause of the black mold behind the kitchen sink. A problem that predated this family. Kathy then stated that it might be possible to get some prorated rent but that she would need to speak with the owner and get back to me. I thanked Kathy for her time and effort to help this family.

I let the family know about my contact with Kathy. A week later on April 25th, I still hadn't heard from Kathy, and neither did the family, so I called her. I was told that she wasn't available but after introducing myself as from Skagit Indivisible Immigrant Task Force, Kathy got on the phone and said, hi Ty - I thanked her for taking my call. She informed me that they would receive prorated rent for April - I think from the day the keys were turned in. I told her that I appreciated her help and that I know that she didn't have to, but did. I told her that the family will be relieved. I then summed up by saying that they would receive full deposit back minus the locks and prorated rent for April, right? - she said yes. I asked when they could expect to receive the check. She stated that she gave her bookkeeper authorization to cut the check on Monday April 23rd - so within a week. I called and informed the family. They were grateful for the help from Skagit Indivisible, for using our white privilege for them/justice and for having money to pay for their new place on a farm - they are so excited to be back on a farm with cows and gardens and.....rather than where they were!

I'll follow up to make sure that they received the check and to check in with them on their new digs.