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NEW YORK



Lawmakers and DA announce bill to upgrade tenant harassment penalties

Bill would make harassing tenants systematically a class D felony.



Joseph Chetrit, Meyer Chetrit, District Attorney Alvin Bragg, Senator Brian Kavanaugh, and Assemblymember Micah Lasher (Getty, Lasher for Congress)

By Lilah Burke

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Lawmakers and the Manhattan district attorney's office on Thursday announced a new bill upgrading criminal penalties for tenant harassment.

The legislation would create a new class D felony, aggravated harassment of a rent-regulated tenant. Harassment of rent-stabilized tenants is already a class E felony, but the bill would upgrade the charges if landlords harass tenants systematically across multiple buildings or have already been found guilty of the lesser charge.

The new legislation underscores the district attorney's focus on targeting landlords. The announcement came one day after the indictment of one of New York's best-known real estate dealmakers, adding Joseph Chetrit to a case

against his brother Meyer. Authorities previously claimed the tenant harassment charges against the members of the influential Manhattan real estate family over a Chelsea building they own would boost a broader enforcement push against landlords.

“We need more tools to hold bad actors accountable,” said Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg at a press conference Thursday. “We want to have a chilling effect.”

The lower felony charge, which requires harassment of at least two tenants, already carries a maximum prison time of four years, although this is very rarely applied. The higher felony charge carries a maximum prison time of seven years.

After tenant-friendly legislation passed in 2019, landlords have had less financial incentive to harass tenants in rent-stabilized apartments. Previously, property owners were able to legally raise the rent if there was a vacancy, which encouraged landlords to pursue turnover.

The Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019 ended that incentive. But tenants’ lawyers say they haven’t seen a drop-off in harassment.

State Senator Brian Kavanagh, who represents parts of lower Manhattan, acknowledged this at a press conference, saying the legislature had closed opportunities for landlords to raise rents on rent-regulated units.

“Most landlords are doing the right thing, they’re following the law,” Kavanagh said. “But unfortunately there are landlords in this city who often systematically try to go after their tenants and try to push them out of their homes.”

Assemblymember Micah Lasher, who represents the Upper West Side, said landlords should see higher penalties if they harass tenants at a higher scale.

Lasher mentioned at the press conference that his first New York apartment rented after graduating from college was owned by Steve Croman, a now-infamous landlord who would later face allegations that he harassed tenants across multiple buildings. Lasher said he sued Croman in small claims court to recover his security deposit after an electrical fire made the apartment uninhabitable. Croman eventually paid \$8 million in tenant restitution after a broad civil case and went to prison for several months related to mortgage and tax fraud.

“That was a case where it became clear that the civil and administrative remedies are not enough,” said Lasher, who previously served as chief of staff in the state attorney general’s office.

Tenant harassment has made headlines recently as Bragg pursues tenant harassment charges against Joseph and Meyer Chetrit. The two brothers have been indicted related to allegations that they harassed two senior citizens and left them in unsafe conditions to encourage them to leave their rent-stabilized apartments. Lawyers for the Chetrits deny the allegations and have said the prosecution is pursuing a political agenda.

“Where power asymmetries exist, criminal activity follows,” Bragg said.

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