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Tenants Celebrate Indictment of Controversial Landlord Steve Croman

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Tenants of 355 W. 45th Street, a Croman-owned building, went for months without cooking gas.

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Getty Images

MANHATTAN — Beleaguered tenants are breathing a sigh of relief after notorious landlord Steve Croman was arrested Monday.

Croman, who in 2014 made Public Advocate Letitia James' worst landlords list, turned himself in on Monday morning at the NYPD's First Precinct in Lower Manhattan, according to the *Daily News* (<http://m.nydailynews.com/new-york/manhattan/nyc-landlord-steve-croman-arrested-threatening-tenants-article-1.2629980>).

He currently faces up to 25 years in prison for 20 felony charges for schemes that involved lying about his rental income to secure more than \$45 million in bank loans, the *News* first reported.

On the same day, Attorney General Eric Schneiderman's office slapped Croman and his associates with a lawsuit over the landlord's alleged efforts to force rent-stabilized tenants out of his buildings with aggressive harassment tactics, Schneiderman's office confirmed.

Tenants in East Harlem, several of whom participated in the attorney general's investigation leading to the suit, are now planning a neighborhood-wide party to celebrate the long-awaited indictment.

"We are working out the details, but it will definitely be an occasion to celebrate," said Juan Haro of tenant advocacy group Movement for Justice in El Barrio.

"We are happy that, thanks to the tenants of these Croman-owned buildings and their contributions to the investigation, it has been fruitful in terms of the charges against him."

For tenants who claim to have suffered for years under Croman's alleged harassment techniques, the charges come as a huge relief.

"This is an important step in stopping the abuse by this landlord," said Jose Garcia, who lives in one of Croman's East Harlem buildings.

"We do know our rights and we know he deserves to go to jail."

The attorney general's office alleged that Croman submitted false mortgage documents that claimed rent-stabilized units as market-rate, and that the landlord inflated the rent charged for commercial spaces to misrepresent rental income.

As a result, Croman scammed banks out of more than \$45 million in loans over the course of three years, according to Schneiderman's office.

Schneiderman's lawsuit lists a bevy of aggressive harassment and coercion techniques used by Croman's employees in attempts to push out rent-stabilized tenants.

The employees allegedly referred to rent-stabilized tenants as "targets," according to the lawsuit, and competed with each other to see who could buy out the most tenants.

Croman allegedly employed private investigator Anthony Falconite — a former NYPD officer who Croman called his "secret weapon," according to the suit — to force his way into apartments by posing as a repairman or building manager.

He then intimidated the tenants into leaving their homes by accusing them of violating their lease, the lawsuit claims.

The suit cites an email exchange between Falconite and another Croman employee in which Falconite calls evicting tenants a "team sport."

"I know that!!!" responded the other employee, according to the suit. "Who's our next target? We have to start lining them up!!!"

Schneiderman's lawsuit also details "intolerable living conditions" — such as dangerous levels of lead dust — that Croman constantly refused to address in defiance of court orders.

Croman owns more than 140 apartment buildings across Manhattan, according to the attorney general's office. Each property is listed on a website put together by an alliance of his tenants. (<http://www.cromantenants.org/properties>)

The Movement for Justice in El Barrio joined a handful of other advocacy groups in an attempt to deliver a list of demands to the office of 9300 Realty, Croman's realty group, in April.

The activists were instead booted from the office and threatened with arrest. (<https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20160407/noho/tenants-trying-confront-controversial-landlord-get-booted-from-office>)

Many other tenants throughout the city had previously protested Croman's aggressive tactics, sharing horror stories of buyout attempts and cut amenities. (<https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20151109/hells-kitchen-clinton/landlord-accused-of-harassment-leaves-hk-tenants-without-gas-for-months>)

Croman pleaded not guilty to all criminal charges, according to his attorney who said they have "nothing whatsoever" to do with allegations of harassment made in the lawsuit.

"The charges in this case are defensible and Mr. Croman intends to address all issues in a responsible fashion," said Croman's attorney Benjamin Brafman in a statement.