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New York City and State Officials Joining Forces to Combat Tenant Harassment



By NIKITA STEWART FEB. 19, 2015

With tenant harassment complaints against landlords on the rise, New York City and state officials announced on Thursday the creation of a multiagency task force aimed at weeding out and punishing bad landlords.

Tenant harassment complaints in Housing Court nearly doubled to 813 in fiscal 2014, from 435 in fiscal 2011. Last year, the state attorney general's office began 10 investigations into tenant harassment, up from three in the previous year. In the past 18 months, the office has fielded more than 200 harassment complaints.

Many of the complaints stem from a similar motivation: Landlords are accused of harassing tenants to push them out of affordable apartments and replace them with tenants paying higher rents.

Mayor Bill de Blasio and the attorney general, Eric T. Schneiderman, both Democrats, characterized the new Tenant Harassment Prevention Task Force as an unprecedented collaboration among city agencies that investigate building and housing code compliance, and state agencies that investigate and criminally charge harassment. Mr. Schneiderman vowed to use his authority more aggressively to bring criminal charges against landlords when warranted.

"This, this is a game-changer, to have the top law enforcement official in New York state weighing in on behalf of our tenants and fighting to protect affordable housing," Mr. de Blasio said at a news conference at South Brooklyn Legal Services, a nonprofit organization that provides legal assistance to low-income people.

Mr. de Blasio, Mr. Schneiderman and other officials described a disconnect among regulatory authorities that had allowed troublesome landlords to deftly string out court cases and to negotiate reduced fines.

Weary tenants — subjected to unheated apartments, extreme disrepair or outright scare tactics — end up moving out well before landlords are punished.

Under the task force, complaints will be jointly investigated by all agencies involved — mainly the city's Housing and Preservation Department and the

Department of Buildings, and the state's Tenant Protection Unit, which refers cases to the attorney general's office.

Until now, the agencies worked together "on sort of an ad hoc and anecdotal basis," Mr. Schneiderman said, likening the new strategy to an "all-levers approach to preventing predatory landlords from throwing people out of their homes."

He added that an escalating market that appeared to show no signs of subsiding prompted the city and state to act.

"The market is moving so fast that the unscrupulous cannot help but be tempted into things they might not even think of in a slower market," he said. "When you have people hiring armed thugs to harass tenants, you know we're in a pretty serious situation."

Donna Mossman of the Crown Heights Tenant Union gave a list of landlord tactics to drive out tenants, such as mold and collapsed ceilings, blocked entrances and rodents.

The complaints from tenants have increased despite Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's creation in 2012 of the Tenant Protection Unit, which is under the State Division of Homes and Community Renewal.

A news release heralding the task force credited its formation to Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, Mr. Schneiderman and Mr. de Blasio, in that order. The news release also said the Tenant Protection Unit's "successes led to the mobilization" of the task force.

There was some jockeying for the origin of the task force, which Mr. de Blasio and Mr. Schneiderman described as a new approach to enforcement.

Darryl C. Towns, commissioner of the Division of Homes and Community Renewal, praised the governor's work on the issue. The Tenant Protection Unit was the "first of its kind" in the country when it was created, he said, adding that the investigative arm had returned 37,000 units of housing to affordable status and one-third of those were in Brooklyn.

"All of these agencies are going to work together; you will get caught," Mr. de Blasio said of landlords. "There will be severe penalties. You're going to wish you had not violated the law."

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