

Housing Tips Spring 2008

Housing Tips

Mediation For Results

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Happy Spring!

Spring is often a time for new beginnings. It can also be a good time to take steps to make life more manageable and hopeful.

We invite you try out some new ways of being a landlord or tenant:

- Staying calm can sometimes be very tough in certain landlord-tenant situations. We'll show you why it is good business and how to do it.

- Keeping a papertrail is a highly effective way to manage communications when issues arise. We'll show you a smart

and easy way to do this - just fill in the blanks!
Here's to new beginnings!

In This Issue ...

- Put it in writing!
- Anger Management
- Partner Focus
- Bridging the Gap
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Put it in Writing!

Ready-to-use Documentation Letters

"Just a few months ago, I was enjoying a great southern barbeque with my downstairs tenants, and now I'm about to evict them! And our kids are best friends --- I'm not sure I have the guts to follow through. But - I need my rent and they owe the money."

Boston Landlord.

As a property manager or landlord you know the challenge: how can I be flexible and reasonable while protecting my rights? You might phrase it differently: "I want to be fair but not be a sucker!"

PaperTrail is an approach that does not force you to choose between being reasonable and being a sucker. This new and easy-to-use service provides you with FREE letters you can download and use right away to help you reach workable agreements. It can help you keep the peace with your tenants without compromising your rights, your interests or your composure.

In the case above, the landlord contacted Mediation for Results. Together, they discussed how to resolve the dispute. MFR helped the landlord customize a series of firm yet diplomatic letters to the tenant suggesting what resolutions might work including an explanation of legal options available to the landlord. The tenant decided to vacate the unit at a mutually agreed upon time. The tenant secured enough time to find a new place. She also paid most of the back rent. The landlord and tenant expressed respect for each other and even swapped a treasured recipe for barbeque sauce! And all of this without a judge in sight!

In another instance, PaperTrail helped a landlord secure access to a unit to complete extensive rehab. Whether addressing issues over noise, back rent or unauthorized occupants, PaperTrail can help you problem-solve effectively while you exercise your rights.

Peter Shapiro, MFR's program director, explains the motivation behind PaperTrail:

"In our work, disputants expressed a strong need to be able to pursue their own resolutions while improving their legal positions in the event things go to court. They wanted negotiations to go better but also wanted documents that could be helpful if court became necessary. PaperTrail was our answer." Having handled over two thousand landlord-tenant disputes since 1989, MFR has demonstrated it can walk the talk. Remember, PaperTrail is not a substitute for legal advice or representation, but it can meet a real need for documentation while negotiations occur.

So how could YOU use PaperTrail?

Next time you have a thorny tenancy issue that might benefit from both tact and toughness, but you can't find the right words or tone, go to our web site to see if any one of our 35 free and ready-to-use PaperTrail letters will meet your needs: PaperTrail

For more complicated situations you can also contact MFR for a free consultation. MFR will work with you to craft an effective strategy and documents to match it. For example, we have helped people to draft:

- Agreements
- Plans
- Clarifications of rights and responsibilities
- Notifications that tenancies have been breached
- Specifics for how to resolve conflicts and strengthen relationships

MFR can provide these free or affordable services thanks in part to funding from the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development and other sources. Services are fast and can significantly reduce professional fees and valuable time spent on difficult communication. Good luck and remember: put it in writing!

Quick Links

Mediation For Results

PaperTrail

Communication Tools

Anger Management

Collecting the rent when emotions are high!

"Speak when you're angry and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret." Ambrose Bierce

It's already the 21st of the month and again no rent. You were patient last month, but no more! You've had to pursue this tenant for weeks by phone, email and in person WITHOUT A RESPONSE. Now you're mad! YOU HAVE A MORTGAGE AND BILLS TO PAY TOO!

But will getting angry with your tenant get you what you really want? You do want the back-rent. But you probably want the tenant to pay you next month and the month after that. You can always take legal action, but why not pursue your tenant's cooperation before resorting to rights, threats and expensive court procedures?

Anger is natural. How we express it, though, may make or break your success as a landlord. Conveying anger without yelling or blaming can be highly effective. If we lose control however, we may speak our minds but also destroy relationships and cooperation when its most needed.

So, how can we manage our anger when our feelings overwhelm us? A more deliberate approach -

anger management plus diplomacy skills - can improve your tenant relationships AND secure the rent.

The next time you need to negotiate but are feeling overwhelmed by anger, try these tips:

- Stop and Breathe! Before taking any action with your tenant, talk to someone; write it down; walk it off; take four (4) long, slow, deep breaths or do anything else that can restore your composure. You need to be able to think clearly before AND during contact with your tenant. Do not make any decision when you are angry. When you are calm and clear-headed you will be in a better place to succeed.

- Don't threaten! Avoid using threats or consequences. Instead try a business-like approach with your tenant. Your goal is to reach a workable agreement with your tenant before considering the use of threats.

- Listen and Learn! When you speak with your tenant your first task is to understand. Wait before telling your side of the story. Start with a question like: "What's going on?" Then listen, and make sure she knows you've heard her. Only then should you make a request or tell your side of the story. Go to Communication Tools in the Tips and Resources at our web page for more.

Remember -- listening to your tenant does not mean you agree with her point of view. When your tenant feels acknowledged and understood, she will likely be more receptive, and agreeable to your requests - and to paying the rent!

At Mediation for Results, we spend our days mediating, training and coaching on these and other communication challenges. Please call us at 617 494-0444 ext 317; email us at pshapiro@mediationforresults.org or visit our website www.mediationforresults.org to learn how we can help you.

Partner Focus

Tri-City Community Action Program Inc. (Tri CAP) is a multi-service, anti-poverty agency serving the Massachusetts cities of Malden, Medford, Everett, and surrounding communities. Tri-CAP runs successful and vital programs including energy assistance, weatherization, legal assistance, advocacy, housing search, Head Start and more. The agency works collaboratively with an array of service providers and community-based organizations, including Mediation For Results.

MFR works closely with Tri-CAP's Pro Bono Legal Project who provide free legal information, advice and sometimes representation for low income residents. Most of their case-load focuses on areas of eviction, divorce, debt issues, SSI Appeals and other civil law issues. They also staff the Housing Lawyer for the Day program at Malden District Court, providing legal assistance on days when eviction cases are heard.

In addition to their case work, Tri-CAP provides training and informational booklets to tenants and landlords and refers appropriate cases to mediation. We are very fortunate to work with an organization that helps MFR in its efforts to prevent homelessness and manage difficult housing problems. To learn more about Tri-CAP or to access the Pro-Bono Legal Project, call 781-322-4125 or visit their website at www.tri-cap.org

Bridging the Gap

Between Tenants and Landlords

"I'll never forget the look on my tenant's face when his five-year-old daughter walked into her newly painted pink room!"
Landlord, Malden

"My landlord lives about twenty miles away so I don't bother him about small things. I replace bulbs in the hallway, make sure the garbage is put out for all the tenants and I try to keep the place looking like home for us all. He probably doesn't know I do this, but he is a good guy; he cares. Anyway, it feels good to take some pride in the place."

Tenant, Brighton

Housing News

Snippets of news from Massachusetts

This is a sample of what the media is reporting about recent or current housing issues

Click on these headlines to connect to the article on the publisher's web site:

Escalating Energy Costs Crimp Profits For Landlords

Malden landlords fined for discrimination

Limiting number students living together has ups, downs

Landlord is no-show at hearingLantigua, others seek six-month moratorium on foreclosures

Always a Plan B!

"OK", you say, "I've read your advice but it's too late to keep a papertrail and I've already lost my cool".

Relax! Even if it seems too late, you have another option. You may be heading to the judge, but there are things you can do to bring peace of mind to a troubled conflict. Call or e-mail us for coaching, mediation, legal consultation or just plain support. We can save you valuable money, time and stress! We can almost always help you - and for free!

Sincerely,

Mediation For Results

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