



## **COVID-19 State of Emergency: Tenant Rights & Resources**

The purpose of this document is to assist District renters in understanding their rights and available resources during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (“Emergency”) declared by Mayor Muriel Bowser. The D.C. Office of the Tenant Advocate (OTA) has suspended its regular walk-in hours, Mondays through Thursdays, 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, for the duration of the Emergency. We are otherwise committed to providing our full range of services.

### **I. OTA Telecommute Services**

- a. **Legal Branch:** Tenants needing legal services should contact OTA’s hotline. Either:
  - i. Go online to <https://ota.dc.gov/>; click on “OTA Housing Assistance” and “Community Service”; click on “Ask the Director” and complete the request; and then click “Submit”; or
  - ii. Call 202-719-6560 and leave a message.
- b. **Policy Branch:** Tenants who have requests or questions regarding policy matters should send an email to Legislative Director Joel Cohn at [Joel.Cohn@dc.gov](mailto:Joel.Cohn@dc.gov).
- c. **Outreach and Education Branch:** Tenants who have requests or questions regarding education and outreach services should send an email to Education and Outreach Coordinator Stephen Dudek at [Stephen.Dudek@dc.gov](mailto:Stephen.Dudek@dc.gov). Mr. Dudek is conducting virtual trainings during the Emergency.
- d. **Emergency Housing Assistance:** OTA will respond to displacements in collaboration with the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA), DC Homeland Security (HSEMA), or the American Red Cross.

### **II. Tenant rights & protections during the Emergency<sup>1</sup>**

- a. **Rent Increase Freeze & Rent Collection**
  - i. ***Rent increase freeze:***
    1. Rent increases during the Emergency are prohibited. This applies to rent controlled and non-rent controlled units alike.
    2. Any rent increase notice issued during the Emergency, or that was to take effect during the Emergency, is null and void. The landlord must issue a new 30-day notice when the Emergency has ended.
  - ii. ***Tenant duty to pay frozen rent amount:*** The laws governing tenant’s duty to pay rent, other than rent increases, have not changed.
    1. Except as explained in iii below, the tenant is still obligated to pay rent in the amount charged just prior to the start of the emergency.

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<sup>1</sup> Act 23-0247, the “COVID-19 Response Emergency Amendment Act of 2020” (effective 3/17/20; expires 6/15/20); and Act 23-0286. The “COVID-19 Response Supplemental Emergency Amendment Act of 2020” (effective 4/10/20; expires 7/9/20).

2. In the event of financial hardship, the tenant should notify the housing provider and ask for an alternative payment plan. Any such plan should be put in writing and should be achievable.
- iii. **Rent relief coupled with mortgage relief:**
1. A mortgage servicer must create a mortgage deferment program.
  2. If a residential or commercial tenant resides at the property, an owner who benefits from this program must offer rent relief to a “qualified tenant.”
  3. A qualified tenant is a tenant who has notified the landlord of an inability to pay all or a portion of the rent due as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.
  4. The rent relief must be proportional to the mortgage relief the owner benefits from under the program.
  5. The landlord **may** require the tenant to repay the total amount of the reduction within 18 months, or at the end of the lease term, whichever occurs first. The landlord cannot charge interest or fees.
- iv. **Form of payment:** The laws governing the form of rent payments have not changed.
1. If the lease requires the tenant to pay by money order or in a fashion that requires the tenant to leave their home, the tenant may contact the housing provider to discuss alternative payment options.
  2. Alternative options include paying rent online via a wire transfer or an app such as Venmo, PayPal, Zelle, or otherwise.
  3. The agreement should be in writing, and it should specify the period of time during which the agreed upon options are available to the tenant (likely at least until the Emergency ends).
- b. **Evictions:** The law prohibits the eviction of any residential tenant during the Emergency. However, landlords can still file eviction actions against the tenant.
- c. **Utility Services & Late Fees**
- i. Utility companies (electric, gas, water, cable, and telecommunications) are prohibited from disconnecting services during the state of emergency and for 15 days following the end of the emergency.
  - ii. Please note, cable and telecommunications companies may reduce services due to the nonpayment of a bill, so long as they maintain a basic level of service.
  - iii. Housing providers are prohibited from charging a late fee during the emergency. A fee for late payment of rent due March 1<sup>st</sup> remains valid, if the grace period expired before the start of the Emergency on March 11<sup>th</sup>.

d. **Deadlines for the exercise of tenant and tenant association rights**

- i. All deadlines for the exercise of tenant and tenant association rights under both the Rental Housing Act of 1985 and the Rental Housing Conversion and Sale Act of 1980 (including TOPA) have been extended.
- ii. Specifically, any such deadline is tolled – or paused – until the end of the Emergency plus an additional 30 days.
- iii. Example:
  1. Tenants in a building with 5 or more units receive an offer of sale on March 1, 2020, from the housing provider.
  2. Under the law, they have 45 days, or until April 15, 2020, to create a tenant association and submit to the landlord a letter of interest in purchasing the building.
  3. On March 11, 2020, the Mayor declares a state of emergency.
  4. When the Mayor lifts the state of emergency, the tenants will have a total of 65 days (45 – 10 + 30) to respond to the offer of sale.

e. **Tenant Notices of Intent to Vacate**

- i. All tenant Notices of Intent to Vacate are tolled, or paused, for the duration of the Emergency.
- ii. Accordingly, a tenant who promised to vacate the unit by a date during the Emergency does not have to vacate the unit.
- iii. When the Emergency ends, the tenant will have exactly the same number of days remaining to vacate unit as they had before the Emergency started.
- iv. The tenant will not be deemed to be a “holdover tenant,” one who fails to vacate by the date promised. This is important because under DC law, a holdover tenant can be evicted and is liable for double the rent.

f. **Landlord access to rental units**

- i. The laws governing landlord access to a rental unit have not been specifically changed. The landlord could be within their rights to enter the unit to conduct repairs, inspections, to show the unit to a prospective purchaser, etc.
- ii. The tenant should be aware of the existing law. Except in the case of an emergency situation in the building, the landlord must provide the tenant with:
  1. A 48-hour written notice (a text message or email suffices); AND
  2. Can only access the unit Monday through Saturday, between 9 am and 5 pm, except for District holidays, unless the tenant agrees otherwise.
- iii. Regarding concerns about spreading the COVID-19 virus, the tenant may request that the landlord defer non-essential work until after the emergency, and inquire about the health and safety precautions being taken. All parties should:
  1. Practice social distancing;
  2. Wear protective gear (masks and gloves) as appropriate;
  3. Make sure that the apartment is cleaned / disinfected after visitors leave;
  4. Wash hands with soap and hot water for 20 seconds.

### III. Court Procedures

#### a. D.C. Superior Court: Evictions

- i. As of April 6, 2020, all trials including at Landlord & Tenant Court scheduled on or before May 15, 2020, are continued.
- ii. ***All evictions of tenants and foreclosed homeowners on or before May 15, 2020, are stayed.***
- iii. The landlord may still file an eviction action, however, no eviction will be executed during the Emergency.
- iv. This applies to tenancies under both oral and written leases.

#### b. D.C. Superior Court: Other actions & emergencies

- i. All Small Claims Court and Housing Conditions Calendars are continued pending further notice from the Court.
- ii. In the event of an ***emergency*** need for court action – including at Housing Conditions Calendar -- tenants can file emergency motions and applications for waiver of prepayment of cost (Fee Waiver Applications) by emailing these documents to [Civilefilings@dcsc.gov](mailto:Civilefilings@dcsc.gov).
- iii. ***Tenants should NOT go to the Moultrie Court House to file emergency motions.***

#### c. D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH)

- i. OAH is operating on a modified schedule at least until April 27, 2020.
- ii. All hearings, except emergency hearings as designated by the Mayor, are canceled through April 10, 2020.
- iii. OAH will notify the litigants of their new hearing date.
- iv. Until further notice, all hearings will be conducted by telephone.
- v. If you cannot participate in a hearing by telephone or do not want to, you must advise OAH. OAH will reschedule your hearing to a time when in-person hearings are authorized to resume.
- vi. Please, communicate with OAH electronically, by emailing OAH at [oah.filing@dc.gov](mailto:oah.filing@dc.gov), or call 202-442-9094.

#### d. Landlord Tenant Resource Center (LTRC)

- i. The LTRC office is closed through Friday, May 15th.
- ii. The LTRC Temporary Phone Line is 202-780-2575. *Pro se* (unrepresented by legal counsel) tenants and small housing providers seeking help from LTRC should call this number.
- iii. A *pro bono* (free) attorney will contact the customer no later than the next business day.
- iv. LTRC can assist a tenant in submitting an emergency motion for a landlord tenant matter.

#### IV. Tenant Associations (TA)

- a. A TA should heed the COVID-19 Emergency orders and recommendations of District government and the Center for Disease Control, including not hosting in-person meetings involving social gathering.
- b. If a TA needs to hold a special meeting, it should explore and execute an online option.
- c. If a TA needs to hold a vote during the emergency, the TA should consider amending the bylaws to permit electronic, online, or virtual voting as appropriate.
- d. If you have relevant questions or concerns, contact OTA's Education and Outreach Coordinator Stephen Dudek at [Stephen.Dudek@dc.gov](mailto:Stephen.Dudek@dc.gov).

#### V. Other Government Services

- a. **DC Council offices & legislative / budget hearings**
  - i. All DC Council offices remain open. However, like the OTA and most DC agencies, they will operate on a telecommute basis.
  - ii. DC Council has suspended all hearings – including both legislative and budget hearings -- until further notice. Some functions, like legislative meetings, are still being held. Please visit <https://dccouncil.us/events/> for more information.
- b. **Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA)**
  - i. DCRA remains operational. DCRA is conducting housing inspections. The housing inspector may conduct the inspection virtually.
  - ii. Tenants may request a residential inspection ONLINE by going to DCRA's website, <https://dcra.dc.gov/>, and click the "schedule an appointment" icon.
  - iii. Also, tenants may request sending an email to DCRA Residential Inspection Scheduling Unit at [dcra.housingcomplaints@dc.gov](mailto:dcra.housingcomplaints@dc.gov). To help DCRA respond to your request as quickly as possible, please include:
    1. Name & Phone Number
    2. Address and Unit Number (if applicable)
    3. Brief description of the selected violations
  - iv. If you feel you **need an emergency inspection**, please do not email. Instead call 202-442-9557 ext. 6 or dial 311.
  - v. If you have questions about how to use DCRA services online, utilize the live chat feature on the DCRA website during normal business hours, call 202-442-4400, or send an email to [dcra@dc.gov](mailto:dcra@dc.gov).
- c. **Rental Accommodations Division (RAD) and Conversion and Sales Division (CASD)**
  - i. Tenants may drop off documents for the RAD, the Rent Administrator, or CASD at 1800 Martin Luther King Avenue, SE. No walk-in consultations are available.
  - ii. The documents will be processed within three business days.
  - iii. For questions about any of RAD or CASD services or other information, contact DHCD at 202-442-7200 or [dhcd@dc.gov](mailto:dhcd@dc.gov).



- d. **Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE)**: DOEE is operational and all DOEE staff is working remotely, except in limited cases. For questions about DOEE services or related matters, tenants may contact DOEE at 202-535-2600 or [doecomms@dc.gov](mailto:doecomms@dc.gov).

For questions about any of the services the OTA provides and information on any future changes, please contact us at 202-719-6560. For up-to-date information and resources regarding COVID-19 and DC Government operations, please visit [coronavirus.dc.gov](https://coronavirus.dc.gov).