



# Renter Stories

## **Joyce's story, a retired civil servant**

In her mid-80s, Joyce retired from a federal government career and has lived in her downtown Silver Spring apartment for 37 years. When building construction required residents in her building to use the fire door as an exit, Joyce, who uses a walker, and other residents found the metal door difficult to open: in the event of a fire emergency, they might become trapped. Residents repeatedly asked building management to fix the door to no avail. When one resident called the fire marshal to inspect the door, the marshal ordered building managers to fix it. Joyce was asked to test the door, and the fire marshal declared the problem solved. But Joyce's problems were just beginning.

A few minutes after the fire marshal left, the property manager threatened Joyce with cancellation of her annual lease in exchange for a month-to-month lease, substantially increasing her monthly rent and rendering her vulnerable to eviction with 60 days' notice. The manager's intent was clear: intimidate and silence Joyce and her neighbors.

The Renters Alliance fought for Joyce, dealing directly with the landlord, facilitating pro bono legal representation and mediation. With our help, Joyce won back her annual lease. She continues to live in her apartment home undisturbed.

## **Metty's story, a cab driver from Ethiopia**

Metty emigrated from Ethiopia to give his wife and two children a better life in the United States. Metty works hard as a cab driver, but his customers forego a taxi ride when the economy takes a downturn. Last year was difficult for Metty. He was unable to earn as much money as he had hoped and was late with his rent. Four times his landlord filed in county court to evict his family. Metty paid his rent and his late charges, barely avoiding eviction, but sought more affordable living quarters elsewhere. Metty found another apartment close by, but it would not be ready for several months. He asked his landlord for an extension on his lease to cover that time, but was told he would have to sign either an annual lease at a 3% rent increase, or a 20%, month-to-month lease. Panicked at the thought of losing his family's home with nowhere to go and little funds, Metty signed the annual lease.

A month later, his new apartment became available. He went to the landlord and asked to break the lease, offering to pay an additional month's rent if they would allow him to stay on. But the landlord refused, saying Metty would need to pay almost three months' rent to break the lease.

The Renters Alliance coordinated meetings with the County Office of Landlord and Tenant Affairs and Metty's landlord to negotiate an amicable agreement with one month's rent payment. Metty now lives in an apartment close to his children's school and several hundred dollars a month less in rent that he can now afford.

### **Dan's story, a retired small businessman**

Dan served his country as a Viet Nam-era veteran who recently retired from his small business to live comfortably in his Bethesda apartment with his wife. Before Dan moved in, building management promised to fix several problems, including a leaky faucet, low water pressure, an undersized commode, broken appliances and a malfunctioning ceiling fan. After building management ignored repeated requests for the promised fixes, Dan filed a formal complaint. Maintenance staff eventually arrived, but cut-rate contractors botched the repairs, causing the ceiling fan to spew toxic chemicals all over Dan's bedroom furniture, ruining family heirloom quilts and furniture. Infuriated, Dan demanded compensation, and eventually received a check. But soon after, Dan was formally accused by the management company of abusing staff and making trouble. He had created, according to them, "a hostile working environment where their staff felt intimidated." The building management wanted him and his wife out.

The Renters Alliance convened a mediation conference with county officials and the landlord's attorneys to resolve the situation. The landlord blasted Dan's alleged behavior, but provided no specifics. We asked what meetings had taken place with Dan to discuss these alleged problems prior to Dan's demands for maintenance and compensation. Their answer: "None." What memos or other communications were provided to Dan addressing his alleged behavioral concerns? Their answer: "None." We asked if there were building staff who were present to address these alleged abuses, or if they had written any complaints to management outlining Dan's alleged abuses. Again, "None."

Despite the Office of Landlord Tenant Affairs support for Dan's claims of retaliatory eviction by a landlord, Dan and his wife – seniors suffering from health problems – decided to move. A fight would have meant a lengthy battle through the landlord tenant complaint process, through the Commission on Landlord and Tenant Affairs, and finally to housing court. Instead, Dan and his wife agreed to move out and lost their home. We stood by Dan as an active renter pursuing the maintenance and service he pays for, while being retaliated against in order to silence a "problem tenant". We are working with the County to make it easier for tenants to fight retaliation regardless of their economic means.

## **Vickie's story, a retired community activist**

Vickie has been fighting renter hardships in her building for a long time. She lives in a building, restricted to residents 55 years and older. Over the last decade, her building has had four management companies and two owners. Residents have suffered through freezing nights without heat, requiring the fire department to pump in emergency heat. In the summer, air conditioning routinely broke down, and mold is visible and growing as leaks and floods continue building-wide, jeopardizing the health of many elderly residents. Broken elevators frequently trap elderly and disabled residents. Repairs sometimes took days and weeks to complete, forcing residents into single usable elevators after long waits. Building-wide floods have required tenants to be relocated to area hotels. The residents suffered from management's incompetence and, on at least two occasions, from criminal behavior by building employees who stole rent checks, broke into more than 50 seniors' bank accounts to steal their money, their identities and undermine their sense of security. Another property manager is now in jail for theft. New management now threatens tenants with eviction if caught "sleeping in common area furniture," "using profanity" or other "misconduct" according to one recent management weekly newsletter.

But Vickie and her neighbors are determined to change things, and the Renters Alliance works with them regularly to strengthen their tenants association, to seek assistance from county government and to negotiate with management in an atmosphere of civility and mutual respect. Vicki and her neighbors have a big challenge ahead. Years of management abuse and deteriorating living conditions are literally making some residents sick, and some are moving out after decades in their apartments. The Renters Alliance is working hard to change the way the county protects renters, and we are pushing building managers to restore Vickie's and her neighbors' confidence in their homes, improve building conditions and restore the dignity and respect the seniors deserve.

These stories are not rare, but typify difficult scenarios, some of them nightmares, for tens of thousands of renter residents across the county who rightly seek to live in quality homes that are stable and affordable. At a recent meeting with the Montgomery County Housing Court staff, we learned that landlords file annually for eviction of county residents more than 47,000 times each year, but fewer than 1,000 of these summons end up in court, and fewer than 200 move to eviction.

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