

Olympia Rental Housing Solutions Focus Group Structure

Renter Advocates Feedback Summary

Participants:

- Participant 1 (Outreach specialist, FSCSS)
- Participant 2 (Columbia Legal Services)
- Participant 3 (Senior Services for South Sound)
- Participant 4 (Eviction Resolution Program, Dispute Resolution Center of Thurston & Mason Counties)
- Participant 5 (Managing Attorney, Thurston County Volunteer Legal Services)
- Participant 6 (Housing Program Manager, SafePlace)

Q1: Do you agree that this is a particularly challenging time to be a renter?

- Universal agreement that it's a particularly difficult time to rent
 - "Horrific"
- Other key insights:
 - Rents rising before pandemic and just rose faster during
 - One participant cited one apartment that rented for \$400/mo. in 1995 now costs \$1,200/mo. without any improvements having been made
 - Noted that the low vacancy rate contributed to current challenge
 - Senior rents have risen 30%
 - Landlords appear more selective (risk adverse) than ever
 - One participant noted that prior "second chance" landlords are disappearing, either because they feel it's not a good investment or because they can achieve better gains selling in a hot market
 - Suggested that the pandemic moratorium may have "scared them off"
 - If you don't have a credit score of at least 650, you won't be selected

Q2: How long do you think renter conditions will remain challenging: weeks, months, years? Why?

- Difficult to foresee any near-term change without additional stock and major market shift

Renter Solution Concepts

Q3: Do you think a landlord registry makes sense for Olympia? Why or why not?

- General agreement that a registry could be beneficial
- Specific reasons cited:
 - Perception that many landlords are unaware of recent changes to state law
 - Small landlords don't have or are unaware of resources and procedures

- Uninformed landlords may end up taking illegal actions
- Having info and resources about rights/responsibilities would be good for everyone
- Other comments:
 - Does it make sense to do Oly-only registry, or should it be countywide?
 - Landlords should be held accountable if operating outside the law
 - Some renters, case workers reluctant to call out subpar conditions – outside inspections could take some pressure off
 - Conversely, mandatory inspections might cause some landlords to leave the market
 - Have seen tenants request repairs only to see rent increase
 - Landlords don't want their property damaged and therefore are highly selective, reluctant to rent to anyone with any kind of negative history
 - Even when case managers offer to pay rent or additional deposit, landlords appear unwilling to take the risk
 - Pierce County had/has a strong landlord mitigation fund and program, with known and reliable second chance landlords (look into it)

Q4: Are there any solutions you think might actually cause unintended consequences for renters?

- Policies perceive as having potential unintended consequences:
 - Capping deposits – sometimes landlords will only take a risk on renting to someone with a blemished rental history if they can add a larger security deposit (double deposit)
 - Similarly, if deposits are capped, landlords will make up for it with higher non-refundable fees; and, if both deposits and non-refundable fees are capped, the landlord will likely just increase the rent amount and serve a smaller, higher-income renter market
 - Suggestion that robust local landlord mitigation fund might provide the “insurance policy” landlords need to expand risk profile
 - Noted that some landlords will be flexible on timing of payment, but not amount

Q5: Do you think a relocation assistance program would be helpful in Olympia?

- Observations
 - Yes, because tenants can be forced out for no fault of their own
 - Lately, these evictions have more to do with an owner selling vs remodel
 - Yes, because people get priced out of current place and they don't have new deposit on hand – could be a game changer
 - Alternative locations are taken or cost at least as much to rent
 - Charity support comes in hundreds when rent need is in the thousands
 - Landlords don't like the hassle of taking someone with a nonprofit pledge
 - Diversion programs that offer \$750 won't get someone very far
 - How many people could we realistically serve?

- Perception that most people priced out of Thurston rental market are moving to Mason, Lewis, Lakewood and even Yakama
 - SafePlace just launched relocation fund to help people move out of county and are seeing one relocation every 4-5 days or so
- This problem is even more of a crisis for seniors who don't want to move, are trying to survive on fixed incomes and already have very little cash after current rent
 - Many seniors subsist by coming to Senior Services to eat and secure groceries from Food Bank
 - We're seeing seniors living in cars and RVs on the street because they can't afford any other living situation
 - Some are moving back in with ex-spouses, extended families and other uncomfortable situations because they don't have options

Q6: What types of prospective tenant screening solutions do you think might work in Olympia? Are there any screening solutions that give you concern, and what or why?

- Would like landlords to consider, or laws to provide for:
 - Some forgiveness or expungement of old criminal offenses (e.g., 10 years ago)
 - More nuanced viewing of debt
 - Some people had medical emergencies
 - Debt to prior landlords is a huge barrier that shows up on screening, but we don't know the backstory
 - Prior evictions could have been no-fault
- Noted that even when they have vouchers (Section 8/government backed rent assurance), landlords still reject people with credit or rental history blemishes (because they can in current market)
 - Providers have "lists" of people with vouchers who still can't find housing
 - With vouchers, it shouldn't matter how much they earn, and screening should not be necessary – they have the rent payment guaranteed

Q7: Other Solutions

Housing Ombudsperson?

- Sounds like a good idea, but perhaps not useful in practice if there is not an affordable rental option available
 - Noted that one local org hired a community resource navigator, but that it only helps if combined with rental assistance funding
- One benefit could be convincing a landlord not to file anything that would further harm a renter's future screening profile if the issue can be mitigated or solved through mediation

Required provision of renter rights and information packets?

- Helpful for both sides to know rules and resources

Permanent alternative dispute resolution process?

- Yes, impartial mediators facilitate a process to resolve a case and slow down the rush to go to court for an eviction
 - Just the filing can have a severe impact on tenants' future ability to find housing
 - A lot of engagement from mom and pop LLs. Positive response overall
 - Less adversarial than court
 - Less than half of evictions per month with ERPP than in past

Low interest loans or grants to landlords for repairs in exchange for rent stability?

- If we actually had the funds, in select cases (in exchange for not raising rents)

Q8: Some cities have placed limits or caps on deposits, move-in fees, late fees and even pet fees. Do you believe Olympia should explore any or all of these ideas?

- Landlords can charge any fees they want, as long as they are reasonable
 - Landlords should not be able to charge non-refundable cleaning fee
 - Landlords cannot withhold funds from deposit for cleaning if charging non-refundable cleaning fee.
 - Landlords should have to substantiate damages or supplies purchased and tenants should be able to contest those charges

Q9: What do you think about extending the notice period for proposed rent increases?

- (Not addressed)

Q10: In your opinion, what might be the pros and cons of implementing Just Cause eviction laws for all tenancies in Olympia?

- General consensus: yes
- Concerns about loopholes
- Might help reassure seniors who are currently very worried about end their lease

Q11: Can you think of other solutions that might work to stabilize or support renters in this market?

- Coordinated Entry
 - Would help but there's been no increase in funding in eleven years
 - Thousands on waiting list, but don't have a coordinator right now
- Rapid Rehousing is a nice idea, but:
 - Landlords feel clientele are changing and becoming too risky, and case workers are required to start with those in greatest need – which makes conditions difficult
 - During the pandemic, landlords felt unheard and attacked and now they don't want to continue

- A risk mitigation fund might help landlords feel “heard”
- Partner with small LLs to overlook screening, we’ll pay for damages
- Prevent places built as affordable housing for seniors from being bought and rents raised
 - Covenant that keeps it affordable forever
- Teachers and social workers can’t afford to live in Olympia anymore
- Expand or create safe parking zones for people force to live out of vehicles
- Ask Olympia families to rent out empty rooms