

Eviction Summit hopes to draw on community ideas

Event slated for April, all community members invited

In 2019, advocates at Community Legal Aid and Fair Housing Contact Service sat down and started talking about how to raise awareness for an issue they felt the Summit County community wasn't paying enough attention to -- evictions. They began planning a community-wide event that would call attention to a moniker they would prefer their city didn't bear: the eviction capital of Ohio.

But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, plans for this event were stalled. And then, something else happened: eviction headlines began dominating local and national news outlets, as housing advocates and public health officials feared what mass displacement of families impacted economically by the pandemic would mean to health and safety measures.

"For two years, the greater Akron community has been talking virtually non-stop about the problem of evictions," said Steven McGarrity, executive director of Legal Aid. "We're ready to stop talking about the problem, and to start implementing solutions."

It's with this frame of mind that Legal Aid and Fair Housing Contact Service have teamed up with partner agencies and the City of Akron to host the city's first Eviction Prevention Summit on April 28th.

“Our premise is that eviction isn’t good for anyone,” explained Tamala Skipper, executive director of Fair Housing Contact Service. “Renters obviously suffer by losing their homes, but landlords also suffer financially. Neighborhoods suffer from constant transiency, and the city overall suffers. It would be better for our entire community if renters had more stable, safe, and affordable housing.”

It’s this thought process that led East Akron Neighborhood Development Corporation to participate in the planning committee for the event, as one of the largest rental housing providers in Summit County.

“We are landlords, but we are also community members, and we want to see all members of our community thrive,” said Cheryl Stephens, CEO of EANDC. “The Eviction Prevention Summit is a chance for all players to sit down together and say, how can we do this better?”

That’s a question Ray Greene, executive director of the Freedom BLOC, and his team have been trying to answer for the last few years.

“The biggest problem we see is that tenants often aren’t at the table for these important discussions,” Greene said. “We’re trying to change that, by empowering renters to use their collective voice to better their communities.”

The Summit is intentionally bringing together voices of tenants and landlords, as well as public officials and community leaders, to bring about real, lasting change, Skipper said.

The full-day, conference-style event will offer attendees the opportunity to hear from expert panels and chat with local resources and agencies. Lunch will feature a live interview with Pulitzer-Prize winning author and MacArthur Genius Fellow Matthew

Desmond, moderated by renowned reporter ML Schultze. The afternoon will consist of facilitated community roundtable discussions aimed at drawing out grassroots solutions to the eviction crisis.

“Our goal is to walk away with real ideas our community can implement,” McGarrity said. “Everyone attending will get the chance to share their ideas, and any net revenue from the event will be put directly back into implementing those ideas.”

Four panels will touch on the following topics: housing equity in community redevelopment, the rule of housing law, fostering positive relationships between landlords and tenants, and the intersection of health and housing.

The committee planning the event includes Community Legal Aid, Fair Housing Contact Service, Freedom BLOC, Akron-Summit Public Library, the City of Akron, EANDC, as well as landlord Billi Copeland-King and journalist ML Schultze. Key collaborators include Akron METRO, who is offering free transportation on city buses to anyone who presents a flier or information on their phone about the event.

Those interested can learn more or register at www.evictionsummit.org.

Sidebar:

Eviction Prevention Summit

April 28th, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

John S. Knight Center in Akron

www.evictionsummit.org

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