

# Housing Justice League Newsletter

May 2020

## Housing Justice League's Mass Meetings on Pause

Housing Justice League has put its Mass Meetings on hold for the time being during the coronavirus, but our work is moving forward with the Housing Justice League COVID-19 tenant hotline and the BeltLine for All campaign. Much of our Eviction Defense Team's work is now moving forward within the hotline effort. We are making an effort to make sure we get our newsletter out while the mass meetings are on pause to share what's going on!

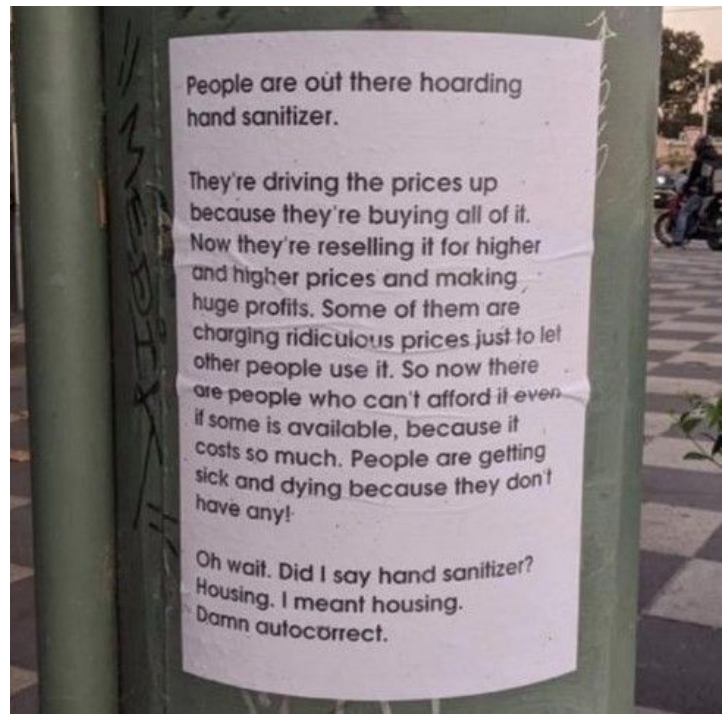
## Housing Justice League's COVID-19 Tenant Hotline

By *Natalie McLaughlin*

Almost two months ago on March 25, Housing Justice League launched its Housing Emergency COVID-19 hotline. We launched the hotline as a way to respond to a frightening and unpredictable situation in which suddenly millions of tenants across the country have lost their jobs or are unable to work and are now can't make rent. This crisis has unfolded on top of an already highly extractive and discriminatory private rental market and an extreme shortage of affordable housing.

We wanted to be able to hear directly from tenants about what they're facing in this time and support them in their housing struggles. The hotline has been a crucial way for us to get information to renters about their legal rights, federal tenant protections, court closures, referrals to direct service organizations offering financial assistance, and of course, tenant organizing.

Now more than ever, stable housing is public health. Housing Justice League stands against any eviction occurring during the pandemic. We also stand against increased levels of debt due to months of back rent in communities that are already targeted with predatory lending, [serial eviction filings](#), and extractive fines and fees that come with high levels of policing and mass incarceration. The response of the federal government and the State of Georgia have been woefully inadequate. Georgia is included in the minority of states that have not created the basic protection of an eviction moratorium. At this time we must stand together and stop the people who will try to capitalize off this crisis by evicting us and raising rents to catch up on lost profits.



The tenant hotline currently operates seven days a week for nine hours a day. Since its launch, almost 100 volunteers have signed up to take shifts to make this possible. The hotline has an English and Spanish line. We are still in need of volunteers for the Spanish line, so if you or someone you know speaks Spanish, please [sign up to volunteer](#)! This effort would simply be impossible without the support of everyone involved.

Many hotline callers who have expressed interest in organizing have gone on to work with the "call-back team" to



start organizing with their neighbors (definitely a challenge in the time of social distancing) and negotiating for rent reduction or cancellation with their landlord. Our call-back team has also worked with numerous callers to intervene in cases of “self-help” (illegal) evictions which seem to be becoming more common as desperate landlords face a closed judicial system.

As of now, we remain under a Judicial Emergency Order issued by the Supreme Court of Georgia. The vast majority of tenant-landlord court dates and answer filing deadlines have been put on pause since March 14. However, under the new extension of the Judicial Emergency, on May 11, courts have the option of opening back up. The Fulton County Magistrate Court will put out more information on May 20 about how they are planning to reopen. We are urging them to stay closed as long as legally possible. To learn more about the hotline, tenants rights, or to sign up to volunteer, visit [www.housingjusticeleague.org/covid19](http://www.housingjusticeleague.org/covid19).

### **How Georgian Terrace Tenants Reduced Their Rent: A COVID-19 Organizing Success Story**

by Foluke Nunn

*Judith Hines lives in Georgian Terrace apartments in Marietta, GA. In April 2020, Ms. Hines called the Housing Justice League Emergency Hotline for assistance. She had lost her income that she was making through Uber as a result of the pandemic, and her property management company was pressuring her to pay her rent. Ms. Hines started reaching out to her neighbors so they could collectively negotiate a rent reduction with their property manager. 17 out of the 20 units in her complex signed on to a letter that was delivered to the front office. As a result of this effort, the property management company reached a deal with everyone in the complex – either reducing or forgiving their rent based on their individual circumstances.*

#### **How long have you lived in Georgian Terrace?**

It was 2 years in March. My twin daughters lived there, and they moved to a better place. I just took over their lease so it wouldn't affect their credit.

#### **What led you to call the Housing Justice League hotline?**

Because I didn't have the money and I needed support.

#### **Can you say a little about what your landlord was telling you when it became clear that you couldn't make rent?**

Well basically they played hardball, they said that there wasn't anything that I could do about it, and I needed to come in and speak with them. [They said] they couldn't suspend [the rent]

and they could not give me a reduction. But when I took in your letter, and the signatures of all the other tenants, they changed their whole spiel. And that very day that I took in that letter, they not only [reduced] the rent, they called another agency to assist financially, and all my April [rent] was taken care of. And I let her know that going forward until this virus is over, I would only pay \$500 a month.

#### **Why did you make the decision to organize your neighbors? And how did you go about organizing them and encouraging them to sign on to that letter?**

Well if you don't try you won't succeed. I didn't have anything to lose. Even if I didn't have the assistance of your organization, I was still going to go forward and try to make something out of it. I prefer to make arrangements and communicate with people rather than not do anything. So, me going and knocking on everyone's door and explaining to them the support that we got from the Housing Justice League, they were more apt to do it. Because they felt like they had someone behind them, and someone to support them.

#### **How did you convince the people who were reluctant or on the fence to sign on to the letter?**

I told them you don't have anything to lose. What is it that you have to lose? If they say no you're going to be right where you are right now before trying to do anything. But if this works, and your rent is reduced or suspended, you're going to be in a better place. And even if you decide that you don't want to do anything about it, that you're just going to [pay] whatever you can, at least support the ones who don't have [rent]. And at that point they realized she's right, I don't have anything to lose but I can also help other people who have children, that can't do anything. And the very next day, the managers came with a stack of papers going to everyone's apartment that they worked something out with and had them sign it.

#### **Can you say a little bit more about the outcome of the organizing? You were able to get your rent decreased to \$500 per month, and everybody else was able to have an individual deal reached with the management company?**

Correct. And they indicated that they could not speak to me about their situations because of privacy, which I understood. But I do know the gentleman next door to me knocked on my door to thank me. A lot of them did. I didn't ask them what happened or what their deal was, they just said “We worked it out, and I'm so happy, I appreciate it.”



**Do you think that if something comes up again in the future, they'd be willing to organize with you again?**

Absolutely.

**What advice would you give to another tenant who might be struggling to pay rent during this time, and dealing with landlord harassment?**

Well, we have a situation right here with my daughter. Right now, I'm going to have her fill out the template that you sent and take it over to the management office. Again, if you don't try you don't know. And of course they're going to tell you everything but the truth, because they're going to see how far they can push you before you [say] okay forget it, I'll go ahead and I'll make the payment. Because I'm sure they're looking at people thinking they have the money... They can't be out of money this soon. If you need help, [...] it's better to have a group of people than to go in alone, because you've got more support.

**Is there anything else that you would like to add?**

I really appreciate you guys supporting me and calling. At first I thought it was a scam. My cousin is the one that turned me on to you, and I really wasn't going to follow through on it until I saw her get results. She's doing the same thing over in her complex and she got results as well so that's when I decided to go forward and do the same thing.

## ***The fight for housing justice at Park Candler Apartments***

*By Ryan Dutter*

About two months into the pandemic the residents of Park Candler Apartments received a notice from property management that stated they had 14 days to vacate the premises & that their utilities would be shut off. Most tenants were caught off guard. How could these landlords behave with such maliciousness? The tenants, stunned by this action to attempt an illegal eviction, instead of vacating the premises decided to fight for their rights.

The tenants formed a Union to coalesce their collective power into action. Spearheaded by 57 year old Kenneth Springer, the Spring Into Action Tenants Association was born from the turmoil of the fight for housing Justice. When asked why they formed their tenant's association Kenneth Springer chimed in "Management is victimizing the tenants without any consideration of their livelihood or well being, & that's why we formed the SIA Tenants association".

Their collective actions eventually led to their local commissioner Larry Johnson becoming involved. Larry Johnson

brought a Fox 5 news Atlanta crew to apply public pressure on the landlords for a concession. This helped the association buy another month's time with the understanding the struggle will continue.

The fight at Park Candler apartments to keep people in their homes is ongoing and far from won. But I wholeheartedly believe the tenacity & resilience of the tenants at Park Candler Apts will prevail against the malevolent forces of capital that look to reduce people's humanity.

## ***What 1 month of organizing has taught me***

*by Annie Burnett*

You may hear the word "organizing" and think that it is some big task reserved only for the greatest leaders of our time. That you don't know enough and can't be of any help. I want to share that 30 days ago I started volunteering with callbacks on the COVID 19 crisis hotline. I had never organized on this scale before, I had never studied law, and never talked to a landlord that wasn't my own. After completing training, reading up on Georgian eviction laws and shadowing calls, I had my first shift. It was sad. I heard from people struggling to feed their kids, people worried about becoming buried in debt, and people fearing homelessness. I used our volunteer manual to convey deep empathy and emotional support. I sent food bank information, financial help resources and encouraged folks to organize with their neighbors. This is one of the miracles of the hotline - that for 9 hours every day 7 days a week there is a number people can call and get directed to help. We offer continual communication and support. What I have learned during this month of volunteering is just how powerful we are when we come together. The hotline is active 63 hours a week. That is far too much for one person to take on. But with over 100 volunteers this is made very doable. When we come together to share the work, the whole is greater than the sum of our parts. That's what organization does, it takes seemingly big and overwhelming problems and divides it among its people to solve it. There is a saying that goes, "a lot of small people, in small places, doing small things can change the world" I disagree with part of that statement. I have a qualm with the word "small." Listening to the stories of our neighbors who are suffering and volunteering our time to find them help is not small. Calling someone's landlord to stop an illegal eviction from taking place is not small. When we work together seemingly small steps turn into BIG change. What I have learned in 30 days working with HJL is that organizing is easier than it seems and a



great place to start is right in your backyard - with your neighbors.

### ***The (Not So) Hidden Power of Black and of Color Women & Trans/GNC Folx***

*By Ali Ture*

*Did you know:*

**BLACK WOMEN, WOMEN OF COLOR AND TRANS/GNC (GENDER NON CONFORMING) BLACK & PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE ILLEGALLY EVICTED DUE TO DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THEIR RACE AND GENDER, ESPECIALLY DURING COVID19.**


#CancelRent



*What is the solution?*

**TENANT ORGANIZING IS THE SOLUTION. HOUSING IS A HUMAN RIGHT AND WOMEN AND TRANS/GNC PEOPLE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN OUR RENT AND OUR HEALTH.**

#CancelRent



*Did you know:*

**THESE DEMOGRAPHICS OF PEOPLE ARE ALREADY MAKING LESS MONEY THAN THEIR WHITE MAN COUNTERPARTS AND THEREFORE ARE MORE LIKELY TO EITHER NOT HAVE THE RENT BECAUSE THEY ARE PRIORITIZING THEIR HEALTH OR CONTRACT COVID19 FOR GOING TO WORK TO BE ABLE TO PAY RENT.**

#CancelRent





# Did you receive an eviction notice due to COVID-19?

## What's happening?

Though courts in Georgia are closed, landlords continue to file evictions against tenants. Since March 21, over 16.2% of the labor force has filed claims for unemployment nationally.

The Fulton County Magistrate Court has been closed, but could decide to reopen **as soon as next Wednesday 05/27**. Landlords in Fulton County filed over 1,000 evictions in the month following the Georgia Supreme Court's declaration of Judicial Emergency on March 13.

Fulton County's population is 1.064 million, and about half of the population rents. In an average month, Fulton County sees about 3,200 eviction filings. If landlords keep filing for nonpayment, Fulton County could see hundreds of thousands of eviction filings in the coming months.

**HJL Hotline:** 404-946-9953

**Atlanta Legal Aid Society:** (404) 524-5811

**Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation:** (404) 521-0790

**Georgia Legal Services Program** (rural GA): (404) 206-5175

For more information on filing your answer see HJL's **Eviction Defense Manual** p. 8-12

[www.housingjusticeleague.org/evictiondefense](http://www.housingjusticeleague.org/evictiondefense)

## What should I do?

File your answer with the court. If you don't file an answer, your landlord wins by default. Filing an answer buys you time.

Talk with a lawyer about what legal defense to include.

If your answer does not include a proper legal defense, you will lose your opportunity to defend yourself in court. Checking off any answer on the form will count as a legal defense, but ask a lawyer about which one suits your case best.

If your landlord receives funding from the government, you are likely protected under the **CARES Act**. You have a legal defense if your landlord files to evict you.

Alternatively, if you are going to owe your landlord months of rent, and you have somewhere else to go, you can escape a money judgment by moving and not filing an answer. **Talk with a lawyer about this!**

If many thousands of tenants file answers with legal defenses, the courts could be backed up for months. Landlords are NOT allowed to change locks, move possessions, or cut off your utilities! It is illegal for them to kick you out without going through a court process.

Even after you receive an eviction notice, you can still negotiate with your landlord. **Collective negotiation is more powerful.** Call HJL to learn about tenant organizing! **(404) 946-9953**



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