

Your Rights as a Tenant in Washington State



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Northwest Justice Project

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This publication provides general information concerning your rights and responsibilities. It is not intended as a substitute for specific legal advice.
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Section 1: Introduction

A. Should I read this?

This publication covers most people in Washington State who rent the place where they live. We call them “residential tenants.”

Many laws apply to the relationship between tenants and landlords. This publication explains the most common state laws regarding your rights and responsibilities as a tenant. The most important law is the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act ([RCW 59.18](#)). (RCW stands for the [Revised Code of Washington](#), the law of Washington State.)

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- ❖ **You will see citations (example:** “RCW 59.18.70”) in this packet. They tell you the specific law. Our citations can help you to look up the law, at your local law library, or online at <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=59.18>.
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There are special laws for people who live in

- subsidized housing programs
- mobile home parks where the landlord does not own the mobile home
- employer-provided housing

If you live in any of these situations, get our publication on that type of housing. The section “**Who is not covered by the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act?**” at the end of this publication has more information.

B. What is this publication for?

It will help you understand your rights and responsibilities as a tenant. **This is general information only.** For help with your situation, talk to a lawyer or call a legal hotline. If you are low-income and live outside King County, call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014. If you live in King County, call the King County Bar Association’s Neighborhood Legal Clinics at (206) 267-7070 between 9:00 a.m. and noon, Monday – Thursday, to schedule a free half-hour of legal advice.

C. Words and expressions you should know

Arbitration – a way to settle your dispute without going to court, usually refereed by a third party.

Dwelling Unit – An apartment, house, mobile home, or other structure (or part of a structure) you rent to live in.

Premises – your living space, including any outdoor areas that only you may use (**example:** a yard or detached garage).

Rental Agreement – can be a written agreement (called a lease) or a verbal agreement to rent property to live in.

Subsidized Housing – housing where some of your rent is paid by an organization like the Housing Authority, or your rent is less than fair market value because you are low-income.

Section 2: Before you Move In

A. Before you rent a place:

- **Read a lease carefully before signing.** Ask about anything you do not understand. Look for hidden charges or penalties. If you sign the lease, you may be stuck paying those charges.
- If something is important to you, **get it in writing.** Do not count on a verbal promise.
- **Find out who pays for** hot water, heat, electricity, parking, snow removal, and trash disposal.
- Find the **utility** controls. Ask questions. Where is the thermostat? Who controls it? Where is the electric box? Where is the hot water heater?
- **If you will be paying an electric bill,** ask the electric company how much electricity on the unit was for the past twelve months. You can also ask the natural gas company for this information.
- **If you will be paying for your own heat,** ask to see last winter's bills.
- Make sure all utilities and appliances are working right.
- **If you share rent:** the landlord can charge you for all of the rent if your roommates do not pay their share.
- Try to talk to another tenant about what the building and landlord are like.
- Check about off-street parking, public transportation, and stores.
- Try to check out the neighborhood at night.
- Check to see that you can lock all **screens, windows and doors** and they are not broken.
- Your landlord's insurance probably does not protect you from damage or loss of furniture or other property. **Consider buying tenant's insurance** if you want this protection.
- **Make a list of major problems in the apartment.** Include the condition of walls, floors, windows, and other areas. Include any problems in the "Condition Check-In List." (See below.)
- **Be careful about putting money down to "hold the apartment."** If you decide later not to rent it, the landlord can refuse to return your money.
- Get something to **keep your records** in. Keep in your file:
 - your lease or rental agreement
 - your security deposit receipt
 - your list of things wrong with the apartment ("Condition Check-In List")
 - rent receipts and cancelled checks
 - your landlord's address and phone number

- any other papers about your tenancy

B. What types of rental agreements are there?

There are two main types:

- The “month-to-month” rental agreement
- The “lease”

1. Month-to-month Rental Agreement:

- Can be in writing OR just be a spoken agreement. If you pay any kind of deposit or non-refundable fee, your landlord must give you a written agreement.
- Has no fixed time limit. It continues until either the landlord or tenant gives proper notice that they want to end it.
- You usually pay rent on a monthly basis.
- The landlord can raise the rent or change the rules any time. S/he must give you written notice about the changes at least 30 days before the end of a rental period. (**Example:** if the rental period ends on June 30th, the landlord must give you written notice of a change before June 1st.)

2. Lease:

- Must be in writing.
- Requires you to stay in a unit for a specific amount of time.

- Restricts the landlord’s ability to change the terms of the agreement.
- During its term, the landlord cannot raise the rent or change the rules unless you agree.
- Leases for one year or more can be exempt from the Landlord-Tenant act, but only if your lawyer approves the exemption.

C. Can the landlord put any rules s/he wants in a rental agreement?

No. Certain terms are illegal to put in rental agreements. ([RCW 59.18.230.](#)) If your agreement has any of these, they are illegal. You do not have to follow them. ([RCW 59.18.230\(3\).](#))

The landlord cannot put a term in an agreement that:

- Waives (gives up/takes back) any right the Landlord-Tenant Act gives you. ([RCW 59.18.230 \(2\)\(a\).](#))
- Makes you give up your right to defend yourself in court against the landlord. ([RCW 59.18.230\(2\)\(b\).](#))
- Limits the landlord’s legal accountability where s/he would normally be responsible. ([RCW 59.18.230\(2\)\(d\).](#))
- Says the landlord does not have to make repairs. ([RCW 59.18.230\(1\).](#))
- Allows the landlord to enter the rental unit without first giving you proper notice. (For more information on your

right to privacy, see below.) ([RCW 59.18.230\(1\)](#).)

- Requires you to pay for damages that are not your fault. ([RCW 59.18.230\(2\)\(d\)](#).)
- Says you must pay the landlord's lawyer fees if an argument goes to court, even if you win. ([RCW 59.18.230\(2\)\(c\)](#).)
- Allows the landlord to take your things if you get behind in rent. ([RCW 59.18.230\(4\)](#).)

D. Deposits and Other Fees

Here are the kinds of deposits and fees your landlord could collect from you when you start renting:

1. Screening fee ([RCW 59.18.257\(1\)](#))
2. Security deposit ([RCW 59.18.260](#))
3. Damage deposit
4. Cleaning fee
5. Last month's rent paid in advance
6. Application or holding fee ([RCW 59.18.253\(2\)](#))

E. What is a screening fee?

Landlords may check your past rental history, eviction history, credit history, and criminal background before they rent to you. (This is called "screening.") Most of the time, they hire a company to make these checks. The "screening fee" pays a company to get this information about you.

The landlord must tell you in writing that s/he is running a check on you. S/he cannot charge you more for the screening than it actually costs. If s/he violates one of these rules, you can sue him/her. ([RCW 59.18.257](#).)

If a landlord rejects you because of something s/he found out from screening you, s/he must tell you in writing exactly why s/he rejected you. ([RCW 59.18.257\(2\)](#).) If you think the landlord rejected you unfairly, you can file a complaint. Our publication called [What the Landlord Must Tell You about Tenant Screening](#) has more information and forms you can use.

F. What is a security deposit?

It is money you give your landlord when you move in. The landlord can use it to cover any unpaid rent or damages. You may not use your security deposit to pay your last month's rent **unless** your landlord agrees.

If you make a deposit, by law the landlord must give you:

- a receipt for each deposit ([RCW 59.18.270](#))
- a written rental agreement ([RCW 59.18.260](#))
- a check-list or statement describing the rental unit's condition (both you and the landlord must sign this checklist) ([RCW 59.18.260](#))
- a statement that says the name and address of the bank or escrow company where the deposit is being kept ([RCW 59.18.270](#))

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- ❖ If the landlord collects a security deposit from you without giving you the written checklist, you may sue to get the security deposit back plus court costs and fees.
 - ❖ You can ask for one free replacement copy of the checklist if you lose yours.
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- ❖ **Important:** Keep these documents in a safe place. You will need them if you go to court. You may even want to make copies to leave with a friend or relative in case something happens to the originals.
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G. Does my landlord have to give back my security deposit?

If you owe back rent or have damaged the rental, your landlord can keep some of the security deposit. S/he can only keep the exact amount you owe for rent or repair costs. If you owe your landlord more than the amount of your security deposit, s/he may sue you. ([RCW 59.18.280.](#))

H. Does my landlord have to pay me interest on my security deposit?

Only if you both agreed to this. ([RCW 59.18.270.](#))

I. What is a damage deposit?

Some landlords collect “damage deposits” to cover the costs of damages you or your guests caused. The landlord cannot use a damage deposit to cover unpaid rent.

J. Can my landlord keep my security or damage deposit to pay for routine upkeep?

No. Your landlord cannot keep your security or damage deposit to pay to repair "normal wear and tear." ([RCW 59.18.280.](#)) **Examples** of "normal wear and tear" are:

- a worn carpet
- chipped paint
- worn finish on wood floor
- faded or dingy paint

The landlord can deduct the cost of fixing damages which are beyond "normal wear and tear." Here are some **examples**:

- broken windows
- holes in the wall
- leaving trash or other items that have to be thrown away
- leaving the rental so dirty that it is unhealthy or unsafe

If the rental unit is damaged by a storm, fire, or vandal, tell your landlord right away. S/he cannot charge you for the repairs if you or your guests did not cause the damage. You can also make a police report.

K. How fast does my landlord have to return my security or damage deposit?

After you move out, your landlord has 21 days to send you all of your deposit OR a letter telling you why s/he is not giving some or all of it back. S/he must send this letter to the most recent address s/he has for you. ([RCW 59.18.280](#).) When you move out, give your landlord your new address OR make sure you have your mail forwarded so you will get the deposit or letter.

L. What if my landlord does not give back my deposit?

Our packet called [My Former Landlord Says I Owe Damages. What Can I Do?](#) has forms for sending the landlord a letter demanding the return of your deposit or use our [Letter to Landlord for Return of a Security Deposit - Self-Help Forms](#) interactive interview. Our packet called [Getting Your Security Deposit Back](#) has more information. Get these at www.washingtonlawhelp.org or by calling the CLEAR hotline at 1-888-201-1014.

M. My landlord went into foreclosure. Can I get my security deposit back?

Maybe. Your landlord must either refund your security deposit or transfer it to whoever takes ownership of the place after the foreclosure. If the landlord does not do either, s/he is liable to you for damages up to twice the amount of your security deposit.

N. What is a cleaning fee?

Some landlords charge a cleaning fee to use to pay to have a place cleaned after you move out. Some landlords request a nonrefundable cleaning fee. No matter how clean you leave the place, the landlord will keep the fee. ([RCW 59.18.285](#) discusses nonrefundable fees.)

O. What is an application or holding fee? ([RCW 59.18.253](#))

You give the landlord an application or holding fee to ensure that the landlord will not rent the place to someone else before you move in. Usually, the landlord keeps a holding fee or deposit if you change your mind and do not move in. If you do move in, the landlord must apply this fee towards your security deposit or first month's rent.

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- ❖ The landlord may not keep any of the holding fee if the unit fails a tenant-based rental assistance program inspection (**example:** Section 8 voucher program). If the inspection does not happen within ten days of you paying the fee, the landlord does not have to hold the place for you.
 - ❖ If the landlord wrongly keeps the fee, s/he can be charged with up to twice the fee if you sue the landlord and win.
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P. What is “last month’s rent paid in advance”?

Paying the last month’s rent in advance is not technically a deposit. The landlord can only use it for payment of that month. **Example:** the landlord cannot keep it for damages.

The landlord must refund this money if you move out early at the landlord's request or after you give proper notice.

Q. What is a “Condition Check-In List?”

You should always get a “Condition Check-In List” before you move in. It describes the condition and cleanliness of the unit or its furnishings. **It is very important.** The landlord may try to blame you for damages that were there when you moved in. With the list, you can prove they were already there.

The check-in list should include a description of all damages in the unit. Do not let your landlord leave anything off, even if s/he says s/he is going to fix the damage, or if s/he says s/he will remember it was there and will not charge you. You have the right to list all damages even if your landlord says not to worry about it. **Do not sign the list until it is right!**

If you pay a deposit, the landlord must give you a Condition Check-In List. Both you and your landlord must sign the list. ([RCW 59.18.260](#).) **Get a copy of this checklist** and keep it in a safe place. If you lose your copy of the checklist, you can ask the landlord for one free replacement copy.

If your landlord does not have one on hand when you tour the place, use the blank sample checklist in this publication.

R. What if I find damages later?

If you find damages you did not notice when you signed the Condition Check-In List, ask the landlord to change the list to include the damages as soon as possible. If s/he refuses or does not get around to it within a week, write the landlord a letter:

- Describe the newly discovered damages.
- State that you did not make them.
- Write that the landlord should add them to the check-in list.

Mail your landlord a copy of the letter. Keep a copy for yourself.

You may also want to take pictures or video of damages if:

- They are major damages
- Your landlord refused to put them on the list
- You did not notice them until after you signed the check-in list

Section 3: While you are Living in the Rental Unit

A. Landlord's Responsibilities ([RCW 59.18.060](#) except where otherwise noted)

Under the Landlord-Tenant Act, the landlord must:

- Maintain the unit so it does not violate state and local laws in ways that endanger your health and safety.
- Keep shared or common areas reasonably clean and safe.
- Fix damage to the chimney, roof, floors, or any other structural parts of the living space.
- Make a good try to get rid of any insect, rodent or other pest problems, except when you caused the problem.
- Make repairs when something breaks in the unit, except if the damage is caused by normal wear and tear.
- Provide good locks for the unit and give you keys for these locks.
- Replace a lock or configure an existing one for a new key, at your expense, when you ask for this after getting a court order granting you possession of a rental unit and excluding your former co-tenant (**example:** ex-spouse, ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend, after you have gotten a restraining order against them). ([RCW 59.18.585.](#))
- Provide the fixtures and appliances necessary to supply heat, electricity and hot and cold water.
- Provide smoke detectors and make sure they work when you move in. (You must buy new batteries and maintain smoke detectors.) (See also [59.18.130\(7\).](#))
- Fix electrical, plumbing, heating systems if they break.
- Fix other appliances that come with the rental.
- Make repairs needed to make sure the house is weather-tight.
- Set water heaters at 120 degrees when you move in.
- Tell you the name and address of the landlord or his/her agent.
- Give you a receipt for your rent payment if you pay in cash, even if you do not ask for a receipt. If you pay in any other form, the landlord must give you a receipt upon your request. ([RCW 59.18.063](#))

If more than one family lives in a house or apartment building, the landlord must provide garbage cans and arrange for trash (and in some cases, recyclable items) pick up. If only one family lives in the house or apartment building, the landlord does not have to provide trash pick-up.

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- ❖ The landlord does not have to pay for damages or problems that are your fault.
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B. Tenant's Responsibilities ([RCW 59.18.130](#))

Under the Landlord-Tenant Act, you must:

- Pay rent and any utility bills agreed upon.
- Follow city, county and state regulations.
- Keep the unit clean and sanitary.
- Dispose of garbage properly.
- Pay for spraying of any infestations (pests) you caused.
- Properly use plumbing, electrical and heating systems.
- Restore the place to the same condition as when you moved in, except for normal wear and tear.

Under the Landlord-Tenant Act, you may **not**:

- Engage in or allow any gang- or drug-related activity on the property.
- Allow damage to the property.
- Allow lots of garbage to build up in or around the unit.
- Cause a nuisance or substantial interference with other tenants' use of their property.

C. What if the landlord wants to change the rental agreement or raise the rent?

There are general guidelines for the ways landlords can change rental agreements.

Look at your own rental document. It may have its own specific terms.

1. Month-to-month agreements:

The landlord must give you at least 30 days' notice in writing if s/he wants to change a month-to-month agreement. [RCW 59.18.140](#). These changes might include raising the rent, or changing rental rules. The changes can only become effective on a day the rent is due.

❖ **Example:** Your rent is due on the 1st of every month. Your landlord wants to make a "no pets" rule that is not included in your current rental agreement. If he gives you a written notice on June 15th, he must wait 30 days and then begin to enforce the rule on the next payment day after that. He cannot enforce the "no pets" rule until August 1st.

A landlord who wants to convert the unit to a condominium must give you 120 days' notice. [RCW 59.18.200\(1\)\(b\)](#).

In a month-to-month rental, the landlord can raise the rent as much or often as s/he wants. He cannot raise the rent to retaliate against you for something you did. [RCW 59.18.240\(2\)\(b\)](#).

2. Leases

In most cases, the landlord cannot change a lease s/he has already signed unless you agree to the change.

D. What if the landlord sells the property?

The sale does not automatically end a lease or month-to-month rental agreement. A landlord who sells a rental unit must notify you of the new owner's name and address. S/he can give you this notice either by personal delivery, OR by mailing you the notice plus posting it on the property.

The landlord must transfer all deposits to the new owner. The new owner must put them in a trust at a bank or in an escrow account. The new owner must notify you of the new bank or escrow company's name and address.

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- ❖ **Seattle Residents:** If an owner of a single-family residence decides to sell the place, the current tenant must get at least 60 days' written notice. [SMC 22.206.160\(C\)\(1\)\(f\)](#).
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E. Can my landlord enter my unit? ([RCW 59.18.150](#))

The landlord must give you at least two days' written notice first. The notice must state

- the date/s of entry
- either the exact time of entry OR a period of time during which the entry will happen, including the earliest and latest possible times
- a phone number for you to call to object to the entry date/time or to ask to reschedule

The landlord must enter at a reasonable time of day. **Examples:** Nine in the morning is

reasonable. Nine at night probably is not reasonable.

The landlord only has to give one day's notice to enter to show the unit to existing or possible new tenants.

You cannot refuse the landlord's entry to your unit to repair, improve or service the unit. In the case of an emergency or abandonment, the landlord can enter the unit without notice.

F. What if my unit needs repairs?

Follow these steps:

STEP 1 – Write your landlord a letter.

- Describe the problem and what needs fixing.
- Include your name, and the unit's address and apartment number. If your landlord is a management company, include the name of the unit's owner, if you know it.
- Try to either deliver the letter personally or mail it "certified mail," and "return receipt" at the post office. This will make it easier for you to prove your landlord got the letter.
- Make a copy of the letter to keep for yourself.

STEP 2 - Wait for your landlord to fix the problem.

After you give your landlord the letter, s/he has a certain number of days to start

repairs. The number of days depends on the problem:

- If you have no hot or cold water, heat, or electricity, or there is a life-threatening problem, your landlord has 24 hours to start repairs. ([RCW 59.18.070 \(1\).](#))
- If your refrigerator, stove, oven, or plumbing fixture is broken, the landlord has 72 hours to start repairs. ([RCW 59.18.070 \(2\).](#))
- For all other repairs, the landlord has ten days to fix the problem. ([RCW 59.18.070 \(3\).](#))

If your landlord does start repairs within the required time, you have three options:

Option 1. You can move out if your landlord does not make a repair within the required time, and does not remedy the situation within a reasonable time. All you need to do is give the landlord a written notice that you are moving out. [RCW 59.18.090\(1\).](#)

The landlord must return your deposits. S/he must also give you back the equivalent of the rent for the days you have already paid.

Example: Your refrigerator breaks. You give your landlord proper written notice. S/he does not fix it after 72 hours, so you can move out. You move out on July 6th. You have already paid rent for all of July. Your landlord must give you back the equivalent of the rent for the rest of the 25 days in July.

Option 2. You can go to court or arbitration. You can hire a lawyer and go to court to force the landlord to make repairs.

(You cannot sue for repairs in Small Claims Court.) If the landlord agrees, you can go to arbitration. Arbitration is usually cheaper and quicker than going to court. (“Expressions and Words You Should Know” at the end of this publication has more on arbitration.) [RCW 59.18.090\(2\).](#)

Option 3. You can hire someone yourself to make the repairs. ([RCW 59.18.100.](#)) This is true in most cases.

❖ **Important:** You must be up-to-date in your rent and utilities to use this method. ([RCW 59.18.080.](#))

To use this method:

- 1) Give your landlord a good faith estimate of the repairs. If you want, you can give your landlord this estimate at the same time as the original notice of the problem. ([RCW 59.18.100\(1\).](#))
- 2) If your repair has a ten-day waiting period: Before you contract to have the repairs made, you must wait the entire ten days after you give the original notice to your landlord about the problem, **and** you must wait two days after you give the estimate (if this is later). There is no rule like this for the 24- and 72-hour repairs. You can contract for these repairs as soon as you deliver an estimate to your landlord. ([RCW 59.18.100\(2\).](#))

- 3) After the work is done, subtract the cost from your rent for the next month.

Can I make as many repairs as I want this way?

No. There are limits to the costs of repairs you can make by hiring someone to do the repairs for you and deducting the cost from your rent.

- Each repair must cost less than one month's rent.
- You cannot spend more than two months' rent on repairs in this way for each 12-month period.

([RCW 59.18.100\(2\)](#).)

Examples:

Your rent is \$750 a month. You hired someone to make repairs in March that cost \$1,500. You could deduct \$750 from the April rent and another \$750 from the May rent. You would not have to pay any rent for April or May.

Your rent is \$750 a month. The repair cost was \$1,000. You could deduct \$750 from April's rent and the final \$250 from May's rent.

There might be a large repair that affects many tenants. Tenants can join together to have the work done. Each tenant can deduct a portion of the cost from his/her rent.

Option 4. You can make the repairs yourself.

❖ **Important:** You must be up-to-date in your rent **and** utilities to use this method. ([RCW 59.18.080](#).)

To use this method:

- 1) Give proper notice and wait the required amount of time depending on the problem. (See above.)
- 2) Fix the problem yourself.
- 3) Once the work is done, subtract the cost of materials and your own labor time from your rent for the next month.
 - Each repair you do yourself must cost less than one-half month's rent. ([RCW 59.18.100\(3\)](#)).
 - You cannot spend more than one month's rent on repairs you do yourself in each 12-month period.

Example: Your rent is \$800 a month. In March, you made four separate repairs that each cost you \$200. You could deduct \$800 from April's rent. You would not pay any rent in April.

You must

- give your landlord a chance to inspect the repairs
- do the work properly and you must follow all legal codes

❖ If you repair something badly, you can be held responsible.

Option 5. You can put your rent in Escrow. This is a complicated process. Read the law ([RCW 59.18.115](#)) at your local law library - or talk with a lawyer.

G. Can I refuse to pay rent if my landlord does not make needed repairs?

No! If you do not pay rent, no matter the reason, your landlord can start the eviction process against you.

H. Illegal Actions by the Landlord

The law prohibits a landlord from taking certain actions against you, including:

1. Lockouts ([RCW 59.18.290](#))

No matter what, even if you are behind in rent, your landlord cannot:

- lock you out of the unit.
- change locks
- add new locks
- keep you from entering the unit in any other way .

2. Utility Shut-offs ([RCW 59.18.300](#))

A landlord can only shut off utilities to make repairs. S/he cannot shut off your utilities

- because you owe rent.
- to try to force you to move out.

It is also illegal for the landlord to purposely not pay his utility bills in order to get the service turned off. You can sue your landlord

if s/he shuts off your utilities. If you win, the judge can award you up to \$100 for each day it was off.

3. Taking Your Property

The landlord cannot take your property unless you abandon the unit. [RCW 59.18.310](#).

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- ❖ It is illegal to put a clause in the rental agreement that allows the landlord to take your property.
-

If your landlord takes your property, first contact the landlord in writing. If you do not get your property back that way, call the cops.

You can also sue the landlord to force him to return your property. The judge can award you up to \$500 for each day the landlord kept the property, up to \$5,000.

4. Renting Condemned Property

Landlords cannot rent property that has existing code violations. ([RCW 59.18.085\(1\)](#).) You can sue your landlord if you find out s/he knew that s/he rented you property with code violations. ([RCW 59.18.085\(2\)](#).)

5. Retaliatory Actions against You ([RCW 59.18.240](#))

The landlord cannot take “retaliatory actions” against you for taking legal action against him. Retaliation cases can be tricky. If you think your landlord is retaliating against you illegally, talk to a lawyer.

Some examples of possible cases of retaliation:

You reported a big hole in your roof to the city. The city notifies your landlord that they

are going to inspect your place. The landlord then tells you he is going to raise the rent.

You properly notify the landlord that you are deducting costs for repairs from your rent. After the landlord gets this notice, she has your heat shut off. Your heat is unrelated to the repairs you needed to have made.

If your landlord does takes an adverse action against you within 90 days of legal action you took against him, it may count as “retaliation” and may be illegal. Talk to a lawyer if you think the landlord may be illegally retaliating against you. You can sue your landlord if s/he retaliates against you for reporting him or for deducting a repair from your rent.

Section 4: Moving Out

A. Do I have to tell my landlord I am moving out?

1. If you have a month-to-month agreement:

Yes. You must send the landlord a letter telling him you are moving out. The landlord must get your letter at least 20 days before the end of the rental period. ([RCW 59.18.200\(1\)\(a\)](#).) The end of the rental period is the day before rent is due. The day you deliver the notice does not count in the 20 days.

Example: Your rent is due on July 1st. You want to move out in June. Get the letter to your landlord by June 9th.

❖ **Exception for Victims of Assault or Domestic Violence** – If you are the victim of threats by other tenants, threats or assaults by the landlord, or violations of domestic violence protection orders, you may be able to end the rental agreement immediately. You must follow certain guidelines. See [RCW 59.18.18.352](#), [RCW 59.18.354](#), [RCW 59.18.356](#).

❖ **Exception for Members of Armed Forces** – If you are a member of the Armed Services, you can end a month-to-month tenancy or a lease with less than 20 days’ notice if you get immediate assignment orders. If you have a lease, you must give your landlord seven days’ notice of the reassignment or deployment order. ([RCW 59.18.200](#).)

If you do not give proper notice, you must pay whichever comes first:

- Rent for the month after you move out

OR

- Rent for 30 days from the day the landlord finds out you moved - [RCW 59.18.310\(1\)](#)

However, the landlord **must** try to rent the unit as soon as s/he finds out you moved out. If s/he can rent the unit less than 30 days after you move out, you only have to pay for the days the apartment was empty. [RCW 59.18.310](#). After the next month, you do not have to pay anything.

2. If you have a lease:

If you move out at the end of a lease, you usually do not have to give your landlord any notice. Check your lease to make sure.

If you stay beyond the end of a lease and the landlord accepts rent for the next month, you become a “month-to-month” renter. All rules for month-to-month renters will now apply to you.

If you leave before the end of your lease, you have to pay the lesser of

- the rent for all the months left in the lease

OR

- all rent owed before the landlord was able to re-rent the unit - [RCW 59.18.310\(2\)](#)

❖ **Exception for Members of Armed Forces** –If you are a member of the Armed Services, and you have a lease, you must give your landlord just seven days’ notice of the reassignment or deployment order. ([RCW 59.18.200.](#))

If your landlord threatens you with a gun, firearm or other weapon, you may move out immediately. ([RCW 59.18.354.](#))

B. Getting your Deposit Back

After you move out, your landlord has 21 days to return your deposit OR give you a letter stating why s/he is keeping all/part of the deposit. If you have a hard time getting your security deposit back, use our [Letter to Landlord for Return of a Security Deposit - Self-Help Forms](#) interactive interview or get our packet called [Getting Your Security Deposit Back](#) They are both at www.washingtonlawhelp.org. Or call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014.

C. Evictions

When a landlord wants you to move out, s/he must follow certain rules. This section explains

- why your landlord can evict you
- what methods the landlord must use
- what to do if your landlord tries to evict you

Our packet called [Eviction and Your Defense](#) has more information on evictions. Get it

online at www.washingtonlawhelp.org. Or call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014.

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- ❖ Always keep all notices and documents from your landlord.
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D. Can a landlord ask me to move out for no reason?

For a month-to-month agreement: The landlord does not need a reason for asking you to move. S/he must just tell you **in writing** that s/he wants you to move out at least 20 days before the end of the rental period. [RCW 59.18.200\(1\)\(a\)](#). **Example:** The rental period ends June 30th. Rent would be due July 1st. The landlord must give you notice to move out before June 9th.

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- ❖ If the landlord does not have a reason for asking you to move, s/ he cannot make you move out in the middle of a rental period.
-

For leases: Usually a landlord cannot ask you to move without a reason if you have a lease. Check your lease for any exceptions.

If you live in federally-subsidized housing: You have other rights. These other packets have more information: [Public Housing Evictions](#); [HUD Housing Evictions](#). You can also call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014 or visit www.washingtonlawhelp.org for more help.

In Seattle and some other places, a landlord cannot ask you to move out for no reason. For more information, call the Tenant’s Union at 1-800-752-9993 or 206-723-0500, or go to your city hall.

E. Can a landlord make me move out?

1. For not paying rent.

If you are even one day behind in your rent, your landlord can make you move out (“evict” you). If you are behind in rent, your landlord only has to give you **three days’ notice**. ([RCW 59.12.030\(3\)](#).) If you pay all the rent you owe within three days after getting the notice, the landlord must accept it and cannot evict you. **S/he does not have to accept partial payment.** If you do not pay the whole amount within three days, you must move out.

2. For not following the rental agreement.

If you break one of the terms of the rental agreement, the landlord can give you a **ten-day notice**. ([RCW 59.12.030\(4\)](#).) **Example:** your landlord could tell you to move out if you keep a cat despite the rental agreement’s “no pets” rule.

If you fix the problem within ten days after you get the notice, the landlord must stop the eviction process. If you do not fix the problem within ten days, you must move out.

3. For certain other kinds of activity.

You cannot:

- use the property for drug-related activity
- engage in gang-related activity
- engage in activity on the premises that creates an imminent hazard to other people’s physical safety

- physically assault someone on the premises or use a firearm or other deadly weapon ([RCW 59.18.130\(8\)](#))

If you do any of these things, the landlord does not have to give you notice before filing an unlawful detainer action to evict you. You do not get to try to correct the problem. [RCW 59.18.180](#).

You also cannot:

- damage the value of the property
- interfere with other tenants' use of the property
- create or permit a nuisance or waste at the property

If you do any of these things, the landlord will give you three days' notice to move. You must move out within three days after getting the notice, or the landlord will file an unlawful detainer action against you.

F. What if I am still living in the unit after the time on the notice is up?

The landlord can go to court and file an eviction process. The process is called "Unlawful Detainer" in Washington. To start the process, the landlord must deliver to you a "Summons" and "Complaint for Unlawful Detainer." [RCW 59.12.070](#); [RCW 59.18.070 \(2\)](#).

G. What if I get a "Summons" and "Complaint for Unlawful Detainer" notice?

This means your landlord is trying to evict you. **You must respond, or you will have to move out automatically.**

1. First, try to get more legal help. Get our publication [Eviction and Your Defense](#) online at www.washingtonlawhelp.org. If you are low-income, call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014. A lawyer at CLEAR may be able to help you over the phone. Or s/he may refer you to a free or low-cost lawyer to help you in person. The lawyers at CLEAR can also send you [Eviction and Your Defense](#). If you are not low-income, try to see a regular lawyer.
2. Next, write and deliver a "Notice of Appearance" and an "Answer." You do not have much time. You must submit these documents quickly, even if you do not have legal help.

The Summons and Complaint will say the deadline for submitting your "Notice of Appearance" and "Answer." Your landlord should deliver the Summons and Complaint at least seven days before the deadline to submit your Answer.

H. What is a "Notice of Appearance?"

When you get a Summons and Complaint, you must submit a "Notice of Appearance" if you do not want to move out. You must also submit a "Notice of Appearance" if you

disagree with anything in the Summons and Complaint. **Example:** you must submit a “Notice of Appearance” if your landlord says you owe rent that you do not think you owe. The “Notice of Appearance” simply lets the court know you want to argue your case.

If you do not submit the “Notice of Appearance,” your landlord will probably win the case automatically. Then you will have to

- move out.
- pay everything your landlord asked for in the Complaint.

The “Notice of Appearance” form is very simple. It is in the [Eviction and Your Defense](#) packet. Get the packet online at www.washingtonlawhelp.org. Or call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014 for a copy.

I. What is an “Answer?”

If you get a Summons and Complaint notice, you must also submit an “Answer.” The “Answer” is your chance to explain your side of the story. The [Eviction and Your Defense](#) packet has a blank “Answer” form from. Get the packet online at www.washingtonlawhelp.org. Or call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014 for a copy.

At the top of the form, fill out the county where the landlord filed the lawsuit. (It is the same county listed on the Summons and Complaint.) Fill in your name as “defendant” and your landlord’s name as “plaintiff.” If there is a case number on the Summons and Complaint form, fill that in, too. If there is no case number on the Summons and Complaint, leave that space blank.

Next, there are spaces asking you to “admit” or “deny” your landlord’s accusations against you. Each paragraph in the Complaint is numbered. In the “admit” category, fill in the numbers of any paragraphs you agree with. In the “deny” category, fill in the numbers of all paragraphs you disagree with.

Use the section called “Affirmative Defenses” to explain your side of the story. Write in this section why your landlord is wrong to evict you. **Examples:** if your landlord did not make needed repairs and you followed all the correct rules to subtract rent for that reason, write that. If your landlord did not deliver the Summons and Complaint more than seven days before the court date, write that.

If you think your landlord owes *you* money, write that in the section called “Set-offs.” List the amount and reasons why you think your landlord owes you.

Lastly, write in your address and phone number. Sign and date the form.

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- ❖ If you have any questions about filling out the form, ask the facilitator for help, if your county has one.
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J. How do I submit my “Notice of Appearance” and “Answer”?

Make at least two copies of each form. Take one copy to your landlord’s lawyer. You should deliver the form by hand. Ask the landlord’s lawyer or his/her secretary to stamp one copy of each form with the date and time. Keep these copies for your file for proof you delivered it before the deadline listed on the Summons.

Next, if there is already a case number on the Summons and Complaint, you must file the forms at Superior Court. Take the originals to the Superior Court in the county listed on the Summons.

If there is no case number on the Summons and Complaint, keep your originals for now. Wait to receive the case number, either in the mail or by personal delivery. Then take the original “Notice of Appearance” and “Answer” forms you filled out to the court. Take them to the Superior Courthouse in the county listed on the Summons.

K. What if the Summons says I have to pay rent to the court?

If your Summons says this, you have seven days to do so. If you do not think you owe rent, or you think you owe less than your landlord says, write the court a letter. Write that you do not think you owe the amount your landlord says. Deliver the letter to the court clerk at the courthouse where the case is filed.

You must either pay the rent to the court **or** deliver a letter saying you do not think you owe the rent. If you do not deliver one of these things to the court within seven days after you get the Summons, your landlord can automatically evict you.

L. Do I have to go to court?

If you must go to court, you will get a notice called an “order to show cause.” Go to the courthouse on the date listed to argue your case. The packets [Eviction and Your Defense](#) and [Basic Tips for Preparing for a Hearing or Trial](#) have more information.

M. What is a “writ of restitution?”

The sheriff can post a “writ of restitution” on your property, or deliver it to you. It means you must move out. You have no more chances to argue your case. If you do not move out on your own, the sheriff will escort you off the property.

N. Can my landlord physically force me off the property?

No. Only the sheriff can do that. The landlord must go to court to get the sheriff involved.

O. Can I get more information on Evictions (“Unlawful Detainers”)?

Our packet called [Eviction and Your Defense](#) is online www.washingtonlawhelp.org. Or call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014.

Our publication called [Landlord/Tenant Issues for Survivors of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and/or Stalking](#) has more information about how the law protects domestic violence victims from certain actions by the landlord.

Section 5: Abandonment

A. When does the law say I have “abandoned” my place?

You are considered to have abandoned a dwelling only if:

- You owe rent

AND

- You have told your landlord, in words, actions or writing, that you are moving out

[RCW 59.18.310.](#)

If both of these are true, the landlord can enter your unit to remove your abandoned property. The landlord must store all the property in a reasonably safe place. S/he must then mail you a notice saying where s/he is storing the property and the date when s/he will sell your property. [RCW 59.18.310.](#) If the landlord does not have your new address, s/he should mail it to the rental address so the post office can forward it.

B. How long does the landlord have to wait before selling my property?

It depends on how much it is worth.

If the property is worth more than \$250, s/he must wait 30 days after mailing you a notice. S/he can then sell all the property, **including** family pictures, keepsakes and personal papers.

If the property is worth \$250 or less, s/he must wait only seven days after mailing you a notice. S/he can then sell all the property

except family pictures, keepsakes and personal papers.

[RCW 59.18.310.](#)

C. What happens to my deposits if I abandon the rental?

The landlord must mail you the deposit OR a letter explaining why s/he is keeping it within 21 days of finding out you have abandoned the property. [RCW 59.18.280.](#)

D. Does the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act cover all tenants?

No.

This packet is for people who are covered by the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act. The Act covers most **but not all** people who rent the place where they live.

Below is a list of people the Act does not include. If a group on this list describes you, get more information. Contact the Northwest Justice Project or another organization for more help. The Act probably does **not** cover you if:

- You live in a mobile home park, but own your mobile home. (Get the packet [Tenants’ Rights under the Mobile Home Landlord-Tenant Act](#) if this applies to you. [The Mobile Home Landlord-Tenant Act](#) is at [RCW 59.20.](#))
- You lease an office for business purposes.

- You live in a medical, religious, educational, recreational, or correctional institution. ([RCW 59.18.040\(1\).](#))
- You have signed a contract to buy the property where you live. ([RCW 59.18.040\(2\).](#))
- You live in a hotel or motel. ([RCW 59.18.040\(3\).](#))
- You rent the land around your house mainly for farming. ([RCW 59.18.040\(5\).](#))
- You are a migrant worker whose employer provides your housing. ([RCW 59.18.040\(6\).](#))
- You live in the same place as you work. You live there only because of the job. ([RCW 59.18.040\(8\).](#))

If one of the groups on this list describes you, the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act may still apply **if** your landlord or another person set the terms of your living arrangements specifically to avoid being covered by the Act.

E. How can I get more information?

Call the Northwest Justice Project’s CLEAR line at 1-888-201-1014. Or go to our website, www.washingtonlawhelp.org. Read these related packets:

- [Eviction and Your Defense](#)
- [Tenants: What to do If Your Rental Needs Repairs](#)
- [Getting Your Security Deposit Back](#)
- [Public Housing Evictions](#)
- [HUD Housing Evictions](#)
- [Tenants’ Rights Under the Mobile Home Landlord-Tenant Act](#)