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Unemployed and low-income East Bay renters teeter on the edge

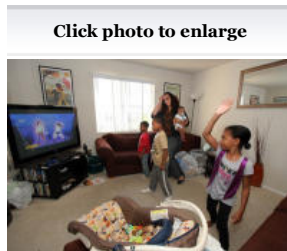
By Rick Radin Contra Costa Times Posted: 08/15/2011 02:36:25 PM PDT Updated: 08/16/2011 05:55:58 AM PDT

As rents rise and jobs remain scarce, more and more East Bay renters are facing eviction.

Legal aid organizations that represent tenants are seeing a sharp jump in clients evicted for nonpayment of rents, with Bay Area Legal Aid of Oakland saying it handled 46 percent more such cases in 2010 than the year before. At least one law enforcement agency that must carry out evictions is noting the same trend; the Contra Costa Sheriff's Office said it evicted 16 percent more people in 2010, not including foreclosures.

The surge in evictions illustrates that many people continue to suffer from the economic crisis, caught in a squeeze between the area economy's slow recovery and their own persistent financial struggles.

"We're in an affluent community, but the people who actually live in the apartments aren't," said San Ramon resident Joana Marin, who was served eviction papers in May. "The incomes are not even close to what people in the surrounding areas who can afford homes make."



Joana Marin, center right, with four of her five children from left is Noah, 5, Illias, 7, Elan...

Statistics illustrate the squeeze. Unemployment is 10 percent in San Francisco and the East Bay, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. At the same time, apartment rents have risen an average of 12.6 percent in the Bay Area in the past year, according to RealFacts, a Novato apartment rental research company.

Rent increases are also squeezing residents. Rents are up 6.7 percent in Oakland, 4.9 percent in Concord and 5.5 percent in Walnut Creek,

partially because of increased demand from those who have lost their homes through foreclosure.

"We've seen a dramatic increase in private housing evictions," said Haydee Alfonso, managing attorney for Bay Area Legal Aid. "We are also getting increasing numbers of callers who are getting unemployment benefits and facing eviction."

However, the agency has not been able to help as many tenants this year because of fewer attorneys, Alfonso said.

Laura Lane, director of the housing practice at the East Bay Community Law Center in Berkeley, said her agency also is seeing an increase in evictions because tenants cannot pay the rent.

"Historically, our clients have been disabled people or on public benefits," she said. "In the last couple of years, we're seeing people who are recently poor and are now spiraling into homelessness because they

have lost their incomes."

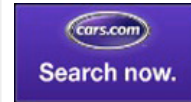
Landlords have a lot of incentive to work with tenants, according to a spokesman for the California Apartment Association.

"Evictions are time-consuming and expensive, and they all have to go before a judge," said Eric Wieggers, a vice president for the Sacramento-based association, which has 17,000 members statewide. "It's the last trigger (landlords) want to pull."

Lakeysha Kaufman, of Oakland, a 36-year-old single mom, has been out of work for the better part of four years.

She and her daughter Jade Everett, 9, have been evicted from their apartment in an East Oakland neighborhood for

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nonpayment of rent.

"It doesn't seem like the laws are very compromising when it comes to the economy," said Kaufman, a former saleswoman for an online insurance broker. "A lot of people are losing jobs and homes, and property owners aren't sympathetic to the situation."

Kaufman, who was laid off from a salaried position in 2007, worked odd jobs and received unemployment insurance for about two years.

When the unemployment extensions ran out, she took a job on commission for six months but couldn't make ends meet.

She missed three rent payments before her landlord began an eviction in May.

Kaufman and her daughter have a Wednesday move-out date negotiated with their landlord by the East Bay Community Law Center.

Kaufman said she cannot fall back on family or friends, and she's trying to rent a room in someone's home or apartment.

Bay Area Legal Aid helped Marin and Monte Holliman and their five children stay in their three-bedroom San Ramon apartment after their landlord served them with eviction papers in May.

Marin has been working in a Social Security Administration call center in Richmond since August. Holliman was laid off from his job as a fiber optics technician with Comcast a little more than two years ago.

The family fell behind on its rent after Marin left work in March to have her fifth child and stayed off the job until July 5.

The landlord began the eviction after she paid her \$1,309 rent two weeks late.

"I had paid late on a number of occasions, but it didn't seem to matter before," Marin said.

Bay Area Legal Aid filed court papers responding to the eviction, and the landlord backed off.

"(The property company) knew they were wrong anyway because they had already accepted the rent," Marin said.

Now that Marin and Holliman are up to date with the rent, they've received a 2 percent increase to \$1,338 a month.

Contact Rick Radin at 925-779-7166.

california EVICTION FACTS

Tenants:

- Have three days from the first of the month to pay rent and five days to contest an eviction summons.
- Must have grounds to contest the eviction, such as improperly served eviction, landlord demand for more money than was due, uninhabitable rental unit or retaliation eviction.
- Have five days to remove possessions, after which the sheriff can remove them.

Landlords:


- Must use courts for eviction and may not cut off utilities, remove exterior doors or windows or change locks.
- May be liable for court costs and the tenant's attorney fees if tenants win a court case.

Source: California Department of Consumer Affairs

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