

# Crisis Coordination and Eviction Prevention

## *Lessons from the Housing Court Clinic in Ramsey County, Minnesota*

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### EFFECTS OF THE HOUSING COURT CLINIC SINCE ITS LAUNCH IN 2018

Minnesota's Second Judicial District's Housing Court in Saint Paul has seen an [18 percent reduction in eviction judgments](#).

The number of eviction cases a year [expunged from tenants' records has doubled](#).

The court has seen an [increase in settlement agreements](#) between tenants and landlords. Although the increase includes failed settlements, tenants, landlords, and the court are pursuing more pretrial solutions.

The court has experienced a [drop in the share of eviction filings that lead to an eviction judgment](#).

The court has seen an increase in efficiency. The [share of cases that go to trial dropped 30 percent](#), and the pretrial hearings take less than one hour more a week.

Evictions are major source of instability for renters in the Twin Cities region. Around 1,170 evictions were filed in Saint Paul in 2017, with most resulting from nonpayment of rent. An unexpected expense or loss of income quickly puts families—often people of color—on the housing court calendar and facing the threat of eviction. Saint Paul has many resources to address these residential disputes and budget crises, but they had not been accessible in one place until the launch of the Ramsey County Housing Court Clinic in 2018.

The housing court process provides an opportunity for impartial resolution for tenants and landlords, but court hearings for nonpayment rarely end in the tenants' favor. Few renters who end up in court have the resources to navigate the process successfully or resolve their housing problem, but most landlords have legal representation. The court system could work better if both parties had legal guidance, help communicating with each other, and a way to resolve the underlying issue. That's why local stakeholders collaborated with court officials to begin operating a housing court clinic.

The clinic provides on-site access to no-cost lawyers (from Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services and the Volunteer Lawyers Network), mediators (from the Dispute Resolution Center), and emergency financial assistance providers (from Ramsey County and Neighborhood House). Through the clinic, everyone entering housing court can access expert guidance and supports, improving the chances of landlords being paid rent and of tenants staying in their homes.

### WHAT MAKES THE HOUSING COURT CLINIC SUCCESSFUL?

Our observations of the Ramsey County Court Clinic have found five factors critical to the clinic's success.

#### 1. Visibility and accessibility for people in crisis

Having resources available where the crisis peaks is a key reason the clinic's services have proven successful. Before the court clinic launched, agencies provided services and referrals independently, and tenants and landlords had to navigate the systems alone to figure out where to go and who could help them.

Placing service providers in the court building, where tenants are already appearing for their eviction hearing, has strengthened outreach and enabled families to get assistance before an eviction becomes inevitable. It also allows families to meet with service providers they may otherwise have overlooked.

## 2. A package of complementary supports

Coordination among service providers improves on-site needs assessment and speeds up both the resolution and the court process. Through the clinic, tenants can access (1) legal support to answer questions and guide them through the court process, (2) financial assistance to fill rent gaps, and (3) mediation with their landlord to hear what each party needs to say and determine the feasibility of settling the case. Tenants and landlords who want to explore a settlement can do so with the service providers on-site, receive in-person hand-offs for all referrals, and enter the courtroom with settlement papers in hand.

## 3. State policies that equip the clinic to resolve common disputes

In Minnesota, two statutes support the clinic's success. First, tenants have a right to pay the full past-due rent after the court's judgement to avoid eviction (Minn. Stat. § 504B.291, "Eviction action for nonpayment; redemption; other rights"). This enables financial assistance providers to screen tenants at the court and deliver the payment after the hearing. Second, tenants can file for an expungement, meaning the case is removed from the public record (Minn. Stat. § 484.014, "Housing records, expungement of eviction information"). Removing the record of an eviction filing improves a tenant's future housing prospects. The court's engagement with the clinic has made obtaining expungements easier. The clinic's settlement form asks if the parties agree to expungement after the settlement terms are met. This increases the number of cases that get expunged and reduces the court time involved in obtaining expungements.

## 4. Accessibility for landlords and tenants

Property owners or their representatives are nearly always present at housing court, and tenants that have hope of avoiding eviction will also appear. With both landlords and tenants present, the clinic can provide resources that help both parties communicate and come to a resolution. Locations outside of the court would need to either make more deliberate efforts to engage both parties (such as remote participation options) or adjust the menu of services to those that would function with just one party in the dispute present.

## 5. Continuous learning among service providers

Situating service providers near each other has improved their awareness of each other's value and limitations, leading to greater collaborative problem-solving. The clinic partners have identified ways to leverage their complementary knowledge and skills to improve offerings, such as by adding a question about expungement to the settlement forms. The providers' clinic relationships have also supported problem-solving and collaboration outside of the court setting.

## WORKING TOGETHER TO REDUCE EVICTIONS FOR TENANTS AND LANDLORDS

The Ramsey County Housing Court Clinic has helped tenants and landlords connect with local services to reduce eviction judgements, increase settlements, and facilitate expungements. The clinic has also improved the court's capacity to resolve cases efficiently while fostering housing stability and positive landlord-tenant relations.

## ADDITIONAL READING

*A Head Start for Eviction Prevention: Reaching Families Before They're in a Housing Crisis*, <https://urbn.is/2tgJJ2m>  
*Four Lessons from Minnesota Can Inform the Eviction Crisis Debate*, <https://urbn.is/2S0nPKz>