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New Virginia Coalition Forms to Reduce the Commonwealth's High Rates of Eviction

The eviction rates are among the highest in the nation, and as a result of the foreclosure crisis, more people are renting their homes. In Virginia, this means they are at greater risk of becoming homeless.

April 12, 2018 – In response to new eviction rate data that has come to light, civil legal aid attorneys and affordable housing advocates from across Virginia have formed a new coalition – the Campaign to Reduce Eviction (or CARE) – to slow the rate of evictions in Virginia. Formed under the leadership of the Virginia Poverty Law Center, the group will meet in Richmond on May 22 to kick off their work.

“The excessive number of evictions stems from so many different factors, from a shortage of affordable rental housing to the low minimum wage and even the way some of our laws seem to favor landlords over tenants,” said Christie Marra, the Virginia Poverty Law Center attorney leading the CARE effort. “We plan on taking a careful look at all the factors, to determine which ones contribute most to these numbers, and making every effort to change or eliminate them. It’s simply unacceptable for this many people to live in fear of losing their homes.”

Earlier this week, Princeton sociology professor Matthew Desmond, author of the bestselling, Pulitzer Prize-winning book Evicted, launched Eviction Lab (<https://evictionlab.org>), a website that hosts detailed data about evictions throughout the nation, and ranks cities and rural areas according to their rate and number of evictions as reflected in court records. According to Eviction Lab, five of the ten 100,000+ cities with the highest eviction rates are located in Virginia, including Richmond, Hampton and Newport News, which have eviction rates over 10 percent. Renters in mid-sized cities and rural areas in Virginia are at even greater risk of eviction. Desmond’s data reveals eviction rates as high as 17



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percent for the City of Petersburg and 20 percent for rural Prince George County. And many of the Virginia cities with the highest eviction rates are also home to large numbers of military personnel – causing them to worry about whether their families in Virginia are facing homelessness while they are deployed.

“As legal aid lawyers in the trenches of poverty law in Virginia, these eviction numbers aren’t surprising to us,” said David Beidler, executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Roanoke Valley. “We’ve known all along in Roanoke Valley that the number of evictions was high. We just didn’t realize how high.”

“Many things contribute to these numbers,” added Ann Kloeckner, executive director of Legal Aid Works in Fredericksburg. “Our clients face eviction for many reasons that have nothing to do with whether they can pay their rent.” Those reasons can be as minor as violating the “no pet” provision of a lease or as unavoidable as having your lights cut off because you can’t afford to pay for both electricity and rent. Having to make this choice is all too common given the scarcity of affordable rental units in Virginia. The average fair market rent for a two-bedroom unit is \$1211 per month according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, which is more than a full-time minimum wage worker takes home after taxes.

“Even when a tenant has a good legal reason to get the landlord’s eviction action dismissed, they very rarely have access to an attorney who can raise that defense for them,” noted John Whitfield, executive director and general counsel for Blue Ridge Legal Services in Harrisonburg. He pointed to a 2017 study by the National Center for State Courts (available at <http://brls.org/the-virginia-self-represented-litigant-study/>), which found that tenants with attorneys avoided eviction orders sixty to seventy percent of the time. In more than half of the cases where the tenant did not have an attorney, the tenant was evicted. “Legal Aids across the state make these eviction cases a top priority, but there just aren’t enough legal aid attorneys to represent all of the tenants fighting eviction cases,” Whitfield said. And tenants trying to avoid eviction rarely if ever have funds to hire a private attorney.



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