

# Opinion

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Wendy Metcalfe  
VP Content & Editor in Chief  
Hugh Bailey  
Editorial Page Editor

## Standing up for apartment residents in Connecticut

By Jessica Doll

Recent news stories have reported on how more than a dozen members of New Haven's Blake Street Tenants Union were recently hit with a "mass eviction" action for apparently speaking out on their own behalf. The Connecticut Apartment Association supports any resident speaking out on their own behalf and supports all housing providers that entertain those conversations and work towards mutually beneficial relationships between tenant and landlord.

The CTAA and our member housing providers represent over 67,000 apartment homes in Connecticut. We are part of the foundation of Connecticut living, and we condemn actions that some landlords take that erode public trust, taint the reputation of all apartment home providers and, worse, undermine the sense of home that their residents deserve.

CTAA believes healthy competition should drive innovation, foster customer choice and fuel economic growth. But when competitors resort to tactics that disregard ethical principles, exploit struggling tenants and deny basic rights in the reckless pursuit of profit, they threaten the very essence of fair competition that is critical to growing the tens of thousands more quality apartment homes that Connecticut needs today.

Too often, the narrative is about the failures of some unscrupulous landlords to deliver the minimum basic requirements of decent housing to their residents, many of whom are vulnerable and without the resources to seek alternative places to live. These stories do not reflect the majority of Connecticut's landlords.

Housing providers and residents have rights and responsibilities to one another, and we all need transparency and consistency in the renting process to foster strong relationships and trust. So how do we break Connecticut residents from having to rely on bad actors? Here are three ideas.

First, providers need to communicate clearly with residents, especially when it comes to rent and living conditions. Upfront and honest communications are the key to ensuring that there are no surprises for either party.

Second, residents should be able to report poor housing conditions without the fear of retaliation, which is already

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illegal under both state and federal law. Residents should report poor conditions when they exist and landlords should respond rapidly. Period. The legislature's update of local fines for substandard housing conditions this year was a good start to prod action, and hopefully, policymakers will consider using some of those fines to help pay for inspections and enforcement to help bring housing standards up to current codes and acceptable living standards.

Lastly, state law requires towns to set up fair rent commissions, but no two communities have the same standards. Connecticut can go a long way to bringing clarity and consistency to landlords and residents by encouraging municipalities to have written ground rules for how they will handle and resolve resident complaints about living conditions, rent and the like.

The problem of bad landlords has existed ever since there has been rental housing. Many of the tools to curb this behavior already exist, and they need to be applied consistently and with vigilance.

We are housing advocates. CTAA members work every day to help Connecticut individuals and families find — and stay in — quality, affordable rental living that works for their budgets. We stand ready to work with policymakers, local enforcement agencies, health departments, building departments and residents to stand up against unethical practices, develop ways to assist reporting and enforcement, promote a thriving, innovative and ethically sound marketplace and merit the trust of those we serve in our communities.

*Jessica Doll is executive director of the Connecticut Apartment Association.*