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Evictions Are Down by 18%; New York City Cites Increased Legal Services

By MIREYA NAVARRO FEB. 29, 2016

Evictions in New York City dropped last year to their lowest level in a decade, as the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio bolstered efforts to prevent more New Yorkers from becoming homeless.

Evictions decreased by 18 percent last year, to 21,988 from 26,857 in 2014, even as the number of cases filed by landlords for nonpayment of rent declined by only 2 percent, court and city marshals figures show.

That was the lowest number of evictions since 2005, when 21,945 heads of household lost their homes, according to Housing Court Answers, a tenant advocacy group that runs the information tables at Housing Court and compiles annual eviction totals.

Evictions dropped in 2014, though only by 6.9 percent. Before then, the number had climbed every year since 2005, reaching a peak in 2013, when 28,849 evictions were carried out.

The city has allocated nearly \$46 million for legal services for tenants in the last two years, and the money appears to be having the intended effect, officials said.

“The money the city put in for lawyers is working,” said Justice Fern A. Fisher, who oversees Housing Court as the deputy chief administrative judge for the New York City courts.

Efforts by the Human Resources Administration to accelerate emergency rental assistance to people who are in danger of becoming homeless have also helped, she said, echoing tenant lawyers and landlord groups.

On Monday, Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, and members of his administration heralded the drop in evictions at a news conference and praised an effort started last year by the Human Resources Administration to support tenants who are facing illegal eviction.

“Some combination of things is working,” Mr. de Blasio said.

The mayor said the freeze of rent-stabilized units last year may have also played a role. But he stressed the new and aggressive efforts by the city to fight illegal evictions and to represent tenants in court.

As part of that effort, city workers have been going door to door since last summer to identify tenants who are not receiving essential services such as heat or hot water; in those cases, the city does repairs and charges the landlord. Other times, they identified tenants who were threatened with illegal eviction and city lawyers have intervened in court cases, at no cost to the tenant.

Most low-income tenants in New York still face their landlords’ lawyers without representation of their own. Elected officials, legal scholars and tenant groups in the city and nationwide have long pushed to establish a right to counsel in civic actions that affect basic needs like housing, but the cost is high. In New York City, it is estimated such an effort would cost more than \$100 million.

The \$46 million the city has spent on legal services for tenants over the last two years has brought sizable savings in services for homeless people, given that about a third of families that enter shelters were evicted from private housing, studies show.

One legal services agency, Legal Services NYC, has hired about 90 additional “housing case handlers” — most of them lawyers — since 2014, said Edward Josephson, the director of litigation.

He said the lawyers helped negotiate more time for payments of back rent, fought any overcharges and took landlords to court in cases in which problems have been neglected or tenants have been harassed.

“We’ve had two years to ramp up,” Mr. Josephson said of the increased funding his agency received from the city.

Most cases are over nonpayment of rent, and landlords welcome the declining number of evictions as well. Owners go to court for rent money, not looking for evictions, said Mitchell Posilkin, general counsel for the Rent Stabilization Association, a landlord group.

Mr. Posilkin said several other variables may be at play. The number of eviction cases that have been set for a court appearance is also significantly down.

He noted that the court system has also lost employees in recent years to budget cuts, so it can take weeks longer to get warrants for evictions when landlords win a case.

“It’s only a movement in the right direction if it means that owners are receiving the rent they need to operate their buildings,” he said of the drop in evictions.

But Jenny Laurie, executive director of Housing Court Answers, said the drop was encouraging.

“It was: ‘Whoa! There’s a change that’s noteworthy,’” she said. “We’re definitely seeing more lawyers in Housing Court.”

J. David Goodman contributed reporting.

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