

Legislative Affairs Council - Tenant Rights Advocacy

Summary

- Many students have experienced violations of their tenants' rights and live in properties in Bellingham that are not fulfilling housing codes.
- Students often do not know their tenants' rights or how to address the tenant issues they face.
- The AS and the LAC can promote student well-being by providing resources to inform them of their rights and by engaging the City Council in Bellingham to pass new laws to protect tenants.

Issue Description

Western students are an important part of the Bellingham community. Not only do students work and shop at local businesses, many of them also contribute to the local economy by renting homes and apartments off campus. Unfortunately, many students have experienced violations of their Tenant Rights accorded to them by Washington Law. This is an important issue for the Associated Students of WWU to address because it negatively impacts Western students three ways:

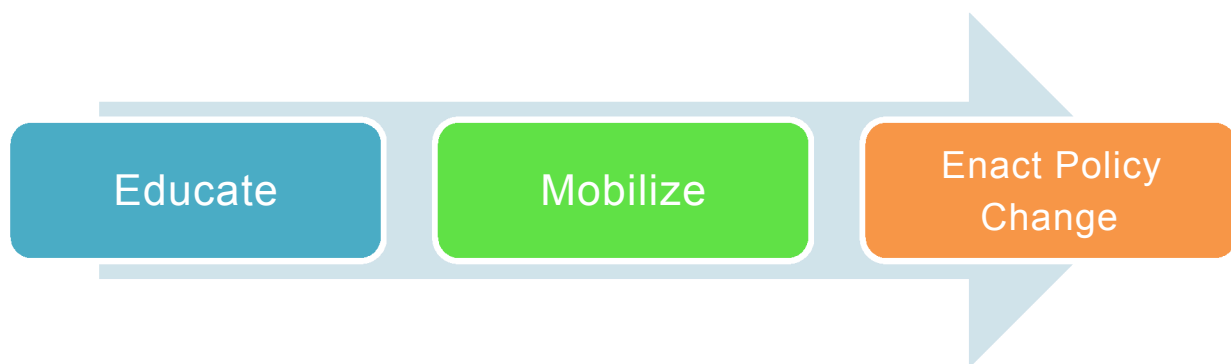
1. **Physically** - Health and safety violations of the rental (e.g. black mold) and negligent landlord oversight of housing can result in serious injury and suffering by student tenants.
2. **Financially** - Withholding security deposits inappropriately and adding fraudulent charges is an unwarranted expense to students.
3. **Psychologically** - Students that experience negligent landlords or housing violations often do not know what to do and feel helpless to resolve it. This impacts student wellbeing and impacts their transitions to rentals after WWU.

Currently, there are laws in place in Washington and Bellingham that protect tenants against the offenses. The law must be followed and protected. Unfortunately, many

students do not know their tenant rights or do not know how to resolve housing issues. The Associated Students can improve student experiences by providing educational resources as to how to rent and what their rights are, and the city of Bellingham must enforce landlord-tenant policies as the law of Washington sees fit. I propose that the AS raise the issue of **Tenant Rights Advocacy** for the Academic school year of 2013 - 2014 to protect and stand up for students.

Solutions

Tenant Rights Advocacy has multiple avenues that different groups can act on. Positive solutions require cooperation and activism on campus, in the AS, in the community, and at the City government.



1. **Educate:** Provide educational resources to students to learn about their rights and the how to resolve landlord-tenant disputes.
2. **Mobilize:** Raise the issue on campus and with the Bellingham community. Run events and promote the issue in school publications. Engage in student discussions as to how to address landlord-tenant issues.
3. **Enact Policy Change:** Communicate with Bellingham City Council student concerns about landlord-tenant issues. Propose to Bellingham City Council to pass ordinances to:
 - o Include a copy of WA Tenant Rights to tenants when a new lease is signed.

- o Begin rental housing inspections to ensure rentals comply with safe housing standards.

Information on Tenant Rights Advocacy

1. Is it Winnable?

Yes, Tenant Rights Advocacy is a winnable issue because of the support that exists in the community and in the student body. Campus activities can be put on with proper planning and motivation, and legal reforms can occur if council members learn of the conditions of student tenants.

2. Does it directly impact and improve student's lives?

Yes, the thousands of Western Students that live off campus are threatened by negligent landlords and by violations of the WA Landlord-Tenant law. Many students are currently unaware of the rental laws of Washington and what to do in case of conflict with their landlord ([Source](#)). Students that are not renting are still impacted by the health of their peers and the safety of the community. Programs that promote student well-being in their homes are a direct improvement in all of our lives.

3. Does it have a clear target?

Yes, the student is the target for mobilization and education programs on campus. The target for lobbying is the [Bellingham Mayor and Bellingham City Council](#), and especially the public safety committee which constitutes the three council members: [Stan Snapp](#), [Terry Bornemann](#), and [Gene Knutson](#). Other targets may be to engage the large realty companies in Bellingham and organizations that would support student tenants like [Bellingham Permit Center](#).

4. Does it build a measurable amount of power?

Yes, the student population at WWU has been directly impacted by negligent landlords and health and safety violations. If these issues are addressed and the

Bellingham City Council acts on enforcement of the WA Landlord Tenant act and protecting students, then it will be a major victory for students. As something that many students unfortunately deal with, having the city support and protect students would encourage and likely inspire students to be more politically active in the future.

5. Does it have a clear and realistic time frame?

Yes, this is an issue that can begin immediately. Mobilization and education can occur over the course of the school year, and students can lobby and participate in Bellingham City Council meetings during their weekly meetings. The AS should set the goal for enacting new policies before Fall 2014 when students move back to Bellingham and the majority of new leases begin.

6. Does it have local support and organizing potential?

Yes, rental safety and regulation has been a common topic here in Bellingham. Rental licensing has some popular support and there are many in the Bellingham community that would support stricter enforcement of WA Tenant Rights. Also, the [2010 Census](#) reported that half of Bellingham city residents' housing units are "renter-occupied". This is an issue that affects many in the community. The Bellingham City Council adopted "*Support Safe, Affordable Housing*" and "*Provide Access to Accurate Information [of City Services]*" in the [Legacies and Strategic Commitments](#) which was adopted in July 13, 2009. Many members of the City Council seem supportive of rental safety regulation, and [Jack Weiss](#) on City Council has even supported passing rental licensing legislation in Bellingham [CSourceJ](#). There are government resources and organizations that could also be supportive. The [Bellingham Permit Center](#) is a service in the Bellingham Housing & Human Services department that inspects rentals to search for building and fire code violations. Also community organizations like the [Campus Community Coalition](#) and allies like [Dick Conoboy](#) can provide support.

7. Could students build a diverse campus coalition around this issue?

Yes, this is an issue that is non-partisan and student oriented. It is not a theoretical or distant issue, and many students have experienced first-hand violations of their tenant rights and rentals that are not up to housing code. However, since the topic of tenant rights is not brought up in our media and personal conversations, many people do not know that many of their peers are experiencing the same problems. When students with shared grievances come together, Students will become galvanized around this topic and mobilization campaigns could empower students to be more active. Organizations on campus could be instrumental in supporting this issue.

8. Is it likely to be debated and acted upon by the local government in the next year?

Yes, members of the Bellingham City Council support implementing new rental regulations and the Bellingham City Council *"voted 6-0 to ask Mayor Kelli Linville to include a rental licensing and inspection system in her 2014 budget."* (Source) This is a [perfect timing](#) to raise the issue as the local government begins discussions on it.

9. Will it strengthen and expand efforts within WWU?

Yes, this is an issue that directly promotes the interests of WWU students and their safety. Mobilizing students around tenant rights can lead to feelings of empowerment and more political and social activism later on. The population of Freshmen students at WWU can also learn their rights before they leave on-campus housing for apartments and houses for the 2014-2015 school year.

10. Can you provide background information and historical context of the issue?

This has been an ongoing debate for many years in Bellingham (Source): Students and Landlords have discussed this issue earnestly in the past but no definitive programs are in place in Bellingham to enforce Landlord Tenant laws aside from Small Claims court and informational resources. However, in recent news this last June, Bellingham City Council *"voted 6-0 to ask Mayor Kelli Linville to include a rental licensing and*

inspection system in her 2014 budget"(Source) This year is an ideal time to bring the issue up to Bellingham City Council and to mobilize students.

11. *What creative and/or innovative tactics could we employ to promote the issue and energize student involvement?*

- Use Social Media and Student Publications to raise awareness and promote discussion on this issue.
 - Participatory Websites: Facebook, Word Press, Viking Village
 - Student Publications: Western Front, Klipsun, AS Review, Western Today
 - Student Media: KUGS, KVIK
- Student petitions to raise awareness and/or polls as to how many students have experiences unsafe housing or negligent landlords.
 - Survey Monkey
 - Use past polls as a reference for the magnitude of the issue.
- 'Open mie' forum and discussion in public places as to student experiences with rentals - *"it's not just you that's experienced it!"* engagement to bring forth shared greivances.
- Events to educate and tell people what their rental rights are - public speakers, lawyers, faculty members, community members, landlords, and organization representatives (e.g. Tenants Union). Also, encourage students to use the resources available to them at the Legal Information Center on campus. Share the infographics on campus.
- Communication and discussion with Bellingham City Council members and Mayor - privately and also publicly in forums at City Council meetings.
- Reach out to WWU Alumni Association.
- Mass gatherings and protests to show solidarity on campus - marches downtown, or protesting outside of realty company offices.
- Discussion with other community organizations working on Social Justice and Fair Housing Anti-Discrimination policies.

- Clear and catchy Logos, Slogans, and Images to bring forth the concept of solidarity (e.g. 'House with Red Heart in background' pins, "I Support Safety" or "Stand up for your Lives").
- Encouraging communication between other academic institutions to raise awareness of this issue and learn of potential solutions. Institutions include:
 - Bellingham Technical College
 - Whatcom Community College - [Associated Students of Whatcom Community College](#)
 - Northwest Indian College

12. *What are Organizational Resources within the AS? How can these be used to address this issue?*

- Updating "A Resolution Regarding a Rental Licensing Ordinance" signed by the Board of Directors of WWU in June, 2010. Include developments and promote this resolution as a strong statement of the AS in solidarity for Tenant Rights Advocacy.
- Encouraging communication between different organizations in the AS to support this issue through different means and sources. Potential organizations include:
 - Western Votes!
 - Legislative Affairs Council
 - Legal Information Center (LIC)
 - Resource and Outreach Programs (ROP)
 - Social Issues Resource Center (SIRC)
- Promote an internal educational campaign within the AS to help others learn of this issue and to discuss ideas for campus solutions. Share and provide updates of this campaign to AS employees.
- Promote this issue to faculty, administrators, and professors. Emphasize the immediacy of this issue and provide avenues for involvement.

WA Legal Resources:

- [Washington Law Hero](#)
- [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#)
- [Tenants Union](#)
- [Washington State Residential Landlord-Tenant Act](#)