

# Sonoma County Residential Tenancy Protections Ordinance Equity Analysis

## 1. What is your proposal and the desired results and outcomes?

The Board's interest is to increase residential tenant protections, above protections offered by State law, in the unincorporated areas of the County. The proposed augmented tenant protections would: remove exemptions from Just Cause protections for income restricted properties; attach Just Cause protections to tenancy upon commencement of tenancy; limit nonpayment of rent as basis for eviction unless nonpayment exceeds 30 days; augment relocation benefits, when applicable, to be calculated at the higher of fair market value or actual rent; establish pre-positioned eviction limitations to be activated by resolution of the Board upon its election to do so concurrent with a declaration of emergency; and require dissemination of tenant rights information in English and Spanish concurrent with any demand to vacate premises or commence eviction proceedings, with copy and related relevant information submitted to County. The proposal has the potential to sustain or improve many health and wellness factors, including physical and mental health, homelessness prevention, housing security, and food access, and offer greater social justice.

## 2. What's the data? What does the data tell us?

The 2020 US Census shows that 38.6% of Sonoma County are renters, which is the second highest among neighboring counties. Black and Latino households are more likely to occupy rented units, with over half of all those populations' households renting. According to both the US Census Bureau and the 2021 update to the [Portrait of Sonoma](#) update, 52% of renters are "rent burdened" and spend more than 30% of their incomes on rent, varying by ethnicity: 59% for Latinos, 68% for Blacks, 52% for Asians, and 53% for whites. Difficulty paying rent or mortgage is reported at a higher frequency by Black and Latino households, which on average have more of their income going towards housing while also earning less than their white counterparts - white households earned 30% more than Latinos, 40% more than Blacks, and 20% more than Asians. This places communities of color at higher risk for housing instability. (See [Generation Housing's Making the Rent: The Human Price of Housing Cost Burden](#).) Accordingly, the expansion of renter protections may help increase housing stability and decrease homelessness for these disproportionately impacted communities.

## 3. How have communities been engaged? Are there opportunities to expand engagement?

The County conducted community engagement in March and April 2024 through a facilitator who interviewed key stakeholders individually and through focus groups with representatives from community-based organizations, housing providers, and tenant advocates. The main themes from that engagement are repeated below. The Board summary and facilitator's reports can be found at this [link](#).

- A. Perceptions of current housing issues and the relationships between tenants and landlords vary widely: Housing providers described generally positive relationships with tenants and minimal existing issues, beyond lack of affordability. They described a strong desire to keep good tenants, keep safe and wellmaintained units, and see a positive return on investment. Tenants and social service providers described housing units in poor condition, and of tenants subjected to drastic rent increases and fearful of retaliation by landlords. Several tenants described positive relationships with landlords. All respondents agreed that lack of affordable housing is a large problem in Sonoma County.
- B. Vulnerable populations face significant additional barriers to finding, obtaining, and keeping safe, affordable housing: Low-income renters, people of color, immigrants/Limited English Proficient individuals, people experiencing homelessness/formerly homeless, those with mental health or medical issues, seniors, and students face additional barriers to accessing affordable, safe housing due to issues such as lack of documentation or income; high costs of rent, fees, and living

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expenses; apparent discrimination; difficulty in accessing information about, understanding and navigating application processes; and lack of recourse in the case of sudden rent raises, eviction without just cause or with insufficient notice.

- C. Housing advocates urge policy makers to implement additional housing protections to prevent abuses and protect the most vulnerable populations: Housing advocates described serious problems with abuses, particularly of vulnerable populations, in rental housing, including very poor living conditions, illegal rent hikes, evasion of just cause regulations, and intimidation, and urged policy makers to implement additional housing protections.
- D. Housing providers warn additional regulation may lead to unintended consequences: Housing providers and some social service providers voiced concern that increased rental regulations and protections fail to help either owners or renters, and lead to negative unintended consequences, including creating adverse relationships between tenants and landlords, creating too much risk for housing providers, making it difficult for housing providers to make a profit, and ultimately leading to housing providers exiting the market and decreasing the rental housing supply.
- E. More social and financial support is needed for renters, and better education on protections and renters' rights needed for all: Housing providers and social service providers suggested that rental assistance would help tenants stay in their homes and avoid eviction. They noted that regulations governing who receives assistance are convoluted and sometimes counter intuitive, making it difficult for tenants to access support. Housing providers and social service providers also believe more funding, with clearer regulations, is needed to enable programs to assist renters and provide affordable housing as well as better collection and use of data is needed to inform a realistic assessment of housing need.
- F. Participants believe enforcement is also crucial in tenant protections and without adequate enforcement measures, ordinance changes alone may not effectively address the challenges tenants face in asserting their rights. They believe additional resources may be required for enforcing existing and proposed protections, such as supporting tenants in accessing legal counsel through additional funding, creating an emergency rent relief fund, or establishing a tenant protection division within County government.

### 4. What are your strategies for advancing racial equity?

1. Given what you have learned from research and stakeholder involvement, how will the proposal increase or decrease racial equity? Who would benefit from or be burdened by your proposal?
2. What are potential unintended consequences? What are the ways in which your proposal could be modified to enhance positive impacts or reduce negative impacts?
3. Are there complementary strategies that you can implement? What are ways in which existing partnerships could be strengthened to maximize impact in the community? How will you partner with stakeholders for long-term positive change?
4. Are the impacts aligned with your community outcomes defined in Step #1?

### 5. What is your plan for implementation?

If approved and when the ordinance is effective, staff would conduct outreach and education activities so that tenants are aware of the augmented protections and have resources to seek assistance if landlords are not complying with the ordinance. Funding is requested for these activities for subject matter expertise, outreach an education facilitation, printed resource materials, and support for messaging the opportunities for education. County staffing support beyond the immediate implementation period when events will be

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planned and executed is not funded. Through implementation, County staff will work with partners and SMEs to develop print resources, distribute those broadly to appropriate channels, and ensure they are updated periodically. Data collected from landlords that will be required by the ordinance will be reported and analyzed periodically to understand where terminations are occurring and who has been most impacted.

### **6. How will you ensure accountability, communicate, and evaluate results?**

The ordinance requires landlords to file tenancy termination notices with the County within three (3) days after serving the notice on the tenant. Landlords will also be required to provide specific data including: the address of the affected rental unit, including rental unit number; the name, address, and contact information of each person or entity that is the Rental Unit owner or property manager; the number of bedrooms and bathrooms, rental rate, and what, if any services were included in the affected Rental Unit at the time of termination (such as water/sewer, refuse collection, gas/electricity) and the number of occupants and basis for termination of the tenancy.

Reports will be produced on the data collected and shared with County leadership and key partners, though a specific program to address follow-up has not yet been developed.