

Delaware Tenants Seek Advice

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When returning messages left on the Tenant Rights Hotline (TRH) we usually have to be remind callers of where they called, because they often testify to having called so many organizations looking for help. Delaware tenants are desperately searching for answers. Usually people call the TRH when they are fed up with their situation. Many times they have gone for a significant period without an essential service like heat or water or they may be facing an eviction.

While those responding to calls are not attorneys and do not give legal advice, staff members do educate the tenants on their rights and responsibilities. Many callers have already read the Summary of the Landlord Tenant Code on the DHC website www.housingforall.org, but they call the TRH to receive further assistance. Still many renters do not know that they have rights governed by the Landlord Tenant Code or that by regulation they should receive a free copy of the summary of that code from the landlord.

The hotline receives calls from all over the state. As in previous years there were significantly more calls from Kent and Sussex counties. In 2004 there was 25 percent from New Castle, 43 percent from Kent and 32 percent from Sussex. As the need for affordable rental housing increases we may see the calls become more equally disbursed among the counties. (Chart I)

Of the callers seeking other information 19 percent were seeking affordable rental housing. Whereas in 2003 11 percent of the callers sought rental housing. In response to this need callers are sent a DHC publication entitled Housing in a Hurry, A Guide to Finding Room in Delaware. There were over two hundred copies mailed directly to individual callers. The document is also available electronically. DHC also distributed over 10,000 copies to agencies and community groups.

While the need for finding and

The Tenants Rights Hotline was established by the Delaware Housing Coalition in 1999. The hotline provides State Wide Advice for Tenants. Callers can dial 1-888-DEL-SWAT (1-888-335-7928) to leave a message concerning housing issues. The calls are returned daily so callers are asked to suggest a good time to reach them via telephone. Advice given to tenants is based on the Residential Landlord Tenant Code and the Manufactured Home Owners and Community Owners Act.

maintaining affordable housing is unlawful evictions. Tenants are evident though the hotline, most advised that a landlord must go through a legal process in order to evict a tenant.

Many times we have to correct what people have heard from a neighbor or co-worker. Most commonly we hear of situations that are considered to be blatant misuse of position by landlords. However, some landlords simply do not know the guidelines

Chart I: Calls by County in 2004

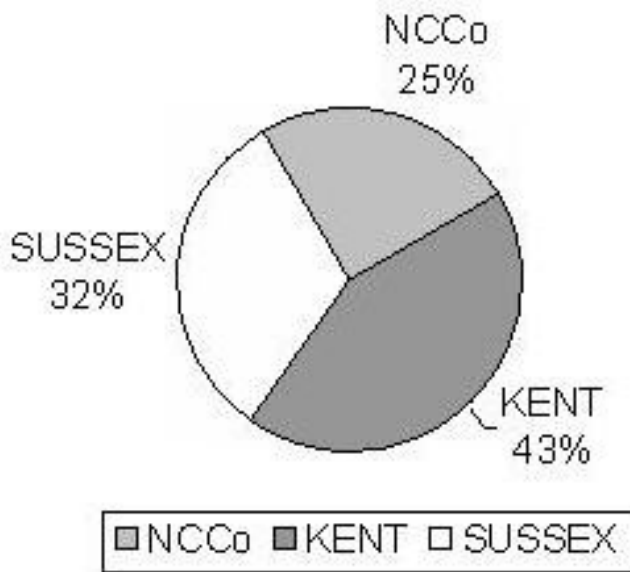
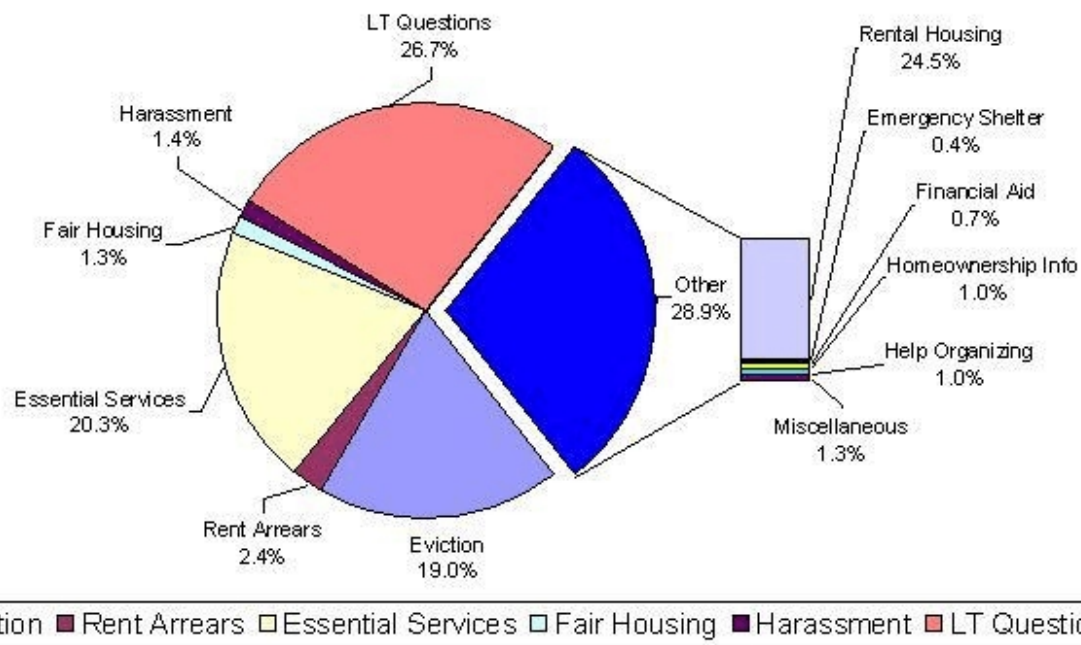


Chart II: 2004 Calls by Need



that govern the landlord tenant relationship. We receive several calls from property owners seeking help in understanding the landlord tenant code. We offer education to all callers even those who call from out of state. We strongly suggest that tenants document their situation and any significant communication with the landlord in writing. We advocate for open and honest communication by all parties in order to foster good relationships between landlords and tenants.

Also, through the hotline DHC is made aware of organizing needs throughout the state. Part of our mission is to identify and develop grassroots leadership. We are always pleased to help tenants gain housing knowledge. Though not always the initial concern, tenants seeking to minimize the power differential between landlords/managers and tenants often find that their situation falls under Fair Housing protections. We direct these and all calls to the proper resource to remedy the situation.

The education available through the Tenants' Rights Hotline has helped

to fulfill the need for the tenant community to have ready access to information regarding landlord-tenant rights and responsibilities. The Tenants' Rights Hotline cannot solve the affordable housing crisis in

Delaware, but increasing the tenure of current renters through education is definitely an important part of our ongoing work.

Below: Jim Gilliam, Chairman of the Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League, providing opening remarks at the Day for Housing in Dover.

