

# *LEGALEase*

Rights of Residential  
Owners and  
Tenants



## Caution:

The information in this pamphlet is intended as a general guide for informational purposes only, not as legal advice. Special, and at times, different, rules apply in areas of the state which are subject to rent control, rent stabilization or Emergency Tenant Protection Act or similar laws. Consult with a lawyer or the appropriate government agency to find out what “special” rules apply to your area. This pamphlet is based on New York law. If you have any questions about your particular situation, you should consult a lawyer.

Except under certain limited circumstances, an owner or landlord may not evict a tenant without first beginning a legal proceeding against a tenant. The actual removal of the tenant and the tenant’s belongings from the premises may not be done by anyone other than a Marshal or Sheriff who has a court order.

## Owner not to Discriminate:

An owner of residential property may rent it to anyone for legal purposes upon almost any terms that the owner and tenant agree. The owner may refuse to rent to anyone; however, the owner cannot refuse because of race, age, religion, gender, disability, marital status or because the tenant has children.

## Rent:

An owner is entitled to receive the rent on time and is not required to send a bill for rent to the tenant. Most lease agreements provide that rent is payable in advance at the beginning of the month. Owners may resort to summary proceedings in court to remove a non-paying tenant from possession of the premises. If rent is paid in cash, upon the tenant’s request, the owner is obligated to provide a written receipt.

## Owner's Right to Access:

**The owner may enter the premises without tenant's consent if there is an emergency or if the tenant has abandoned the premises.**

An owner may enter a rented unit to inspect the premises, make repairs, supply services and, if the lease so provides, to show the property to prospective purchasers, tenants and others. The owner may only enter at reasonable times and, if the lease so provides, only after advance notice.

The owner may enter the premises without tenant's consent if there is an emergency or if the tenant has abandoned the premises. Tenants in multiple dwellings in cities with a population of 325,000 or more, by law, have the right to install a lock on the entry door to the dwelling unit, provided a duplicate key is given to the owner.

## Maintenance of Property:

By law (called the "warranty of habitability"), every written or oral lease or rental agreement for residential premises, including a mobile home, is deemed to contain a covenant and warranty by the owner or mobile home park operator that the premises leased or rented and all areas used in connection therewith in common with other tenants, are fit for human habitation and for the uses reasonably intended. Also, the occupants of the premises shall not be subjected to any conditions which would be dangerous, hazardous or detrimental to their life, health or safety. If the condition is caused by misconduct of the tenant, it is tenant's responsibility to correct the condition.

Unless the lease provides otherwise, however, repair of conditions not covered by the warranty of habitability are the tenant's obligation, unless the apartment is in a "multiple dwelling" (a building with three or more residential units). Then the owner by law is required to keep the dwelling clean and in good repair. Owners of multiple dwellings must also provide heat and hot water and local laws may require the furnishing of other services.

Tenants are responsible for all damages they, their guests or invitees cause to the premises.

Where the owner has breached the warranty, the tenant may be entitled to make the repair at owner's expense and to a reduction in rent or even possibly to terminate their tenancy. Before any tenant resorts to self-help or to a set-off against rent or termination of tenancy, the tenant may want to consult an attorney.

In all multiple dwellings there must be at least one smoke detector and a carbon monoxide detector which the landlord is obligated to install (although in New York City, tenants may be required to contribute to the cost).

### **Who May Occupy:**

Owners may not restrict occupancy of residential premises to a tenant and tenant's immediate family. Residential premises may be occupied by the named tenant, the immediate family of the tenant, one additional occupant and dependent children of the occupant, provided the tenant or tenant's spouse occupies the premises as his or her primary residence. If the premises are rented to more than one tenant, then occupancy is permitted by tenants, immediate family of tenants, occupants and dependent children of occupants, provided that the total number of tenants and occupants, excluding occupant's dependent's children, does not exceed the number of tenants specified in the current lease or rental agreement, and that at least one tenant or a tenant's spouse occupies the premises as his or her primary residence. The apartment must have enough rooms for the extra occupants and the tenant needs to give the landlord written notice and names of all occupants within 30 days after they have moved in.

### **Right to Assign:**

A tenant may not assign the lease without the owner's written consent, unless a greater right to assign is given by a lease, law or regulation. The owner may unconditionally withhold consent

without cause provided owner releases tenant from the lease, upon the tenant's request made on thirty days' notice. If the owner reasonably withholds consent, there shall be no assignment and tenant is not released from the lease. If the lease is assigned with consent, then, unless the lease or document granting consent provides otherwise, tenant-assignor remains liable for performance of the lease by the assignee.

### **Right to Sublease:**

A tenant of a residential unit pursuant to a lease in a dwelling having four or more residential units has the right to sublet the premises subject to the tenant obtaining the owner's prior written consent, which consent the owner must not unreasonably withhold. This does not apply to tenants in public housing, housing for which there are constitutional or statutory criteria covering admission or to tenant's under proprietary leases for cooperative apartments. A tenant of a residential unit in a dwelling having less than four residential units may sublet the unit without consent of the owner unless the lease provides otherwise, in which event, the terms of the lease must be complied with. A tenant-sublessor remains liable for performance of the lease notwithstanding the subletting. The executor, administrator or legal representative of a deceased tenant may request owner's consent to assign or sublet. The owner may consent, deny consent or terminate the lease. If the owner unreasonably denies consent, the lease is deemed terminated. If the lease is thus terminated, the tenant's estate has no further liability in connection with the lease.

A lease is a contract between an owner (landlord) and a tenant in which the parties agree to certain terms for the rental of property. Except as otherwise provided by law, the parties are bound by the agreed terms. A lease may be oral or written, but if it is for a term of one (1) year or more, it must be written. A written lease may avoid misunderstandings.

A lease containing uncompleted blank spaces should not be signed. Oral promises which are not included in the written lease should not be relied upon. Leases should be signed at least in duplicate and all changes in the printed or typed form should be initialed by both parties. The owner and the tenant should each receive a complete signed copy.

A written lease should set forth, at minimum, the following provisions:

- a) Name and address of the owner (landlord);
- b) Name and address of the tenant(s);
- c) The purposes for which the unit may be used;
- d) The address and, if appropriate, the number of the unit being leased;
- e) The amount of rent;
- f) The payment due date of rent;
- g) The commencement and expiration dates of the lease term;
- h) Any renewal or termination options;
- i) Amount of security, if any;
- j) Who provides and pays for utilities;
- k) Who is responsible for repairs not covered by the “warranty of habitability”;
- l) What, if any, alterations or changes tenant is permitted to make to the unit; and
- m) What services, if any, in addition to those required by law, owner will provide.

### **Changes to Agreements:**

Changes to rental agreements are not enforceable unless both sides agree. Rent regulation may also prohibit changes to the agreement. In the absence of an agreement to raise the rent, an owner can either accept the lesser rent or give a notice to terminate such a periodic tenancy, at least thirty days before the final day of the next monthly term.

### **Lead Paint Disclosure:**

Federal Government regulation of residential leases began in 1995. By order of Congress, and as required by the Residential Lead-Based Paint

Hazard Reduction Act of 1992, the government created regulations requiring disclosure of lead-based hazards in most dwellings built before 1978. In such dwellings, upon signing a lease, the owner must provide tenants with both a lead-paint disclosure form and an information pamphlet prepared by an agency of the federal government.

These disclosure rules apply to virtually all housing units built before 1978 (when use of lead-based paint was banned)

The federal Environmental Protection Agency's lead paint notice rules for renovation, require owners of buildings built before 1978 to give tenants certain information about lead paint 60 days before renovating an apartment or common area in the building. When renovating an apartment, owners must give a pamphlet entitled Protect Your family from lead in Your Home to one adult occupant of the apartment.

### **New York City Lead Paint Rules:**

The City of New York has adopted, effective August 2, 2004, by Local Law 1 of 2004 the New York City Childhood Poisoning Prevention Act of 2003, which repeals all prior city laws regulating Lead Paint in Apartment Houses constructed prior to January 1, 1960. Owners of buildings subject to the Law must send annual notices in English and Spanish, between January 1 and January 16 to every tenant to determine if there is a Lead Based Paint Hazard in the apartment or the public areas of the building and/or whether a child under the age of 7 resides in the apartment. If the Tenant does not respond to the survey the Law requires the Owner to make an inspection of the Apartment to determine if there are small children and/or Lead-Based Hazards in the dwelling. Procedures are set forth for testing and removal of Lead-Paint Based Conditions by the Landlord. For more details, you may contact the City of New York Department of Health and Mental Hygiene as 125 Worth Street, New York, NY 10013, or Department of Housing and Preservation and Development at 100 Gold Street, New York, NY 10038.

## Security:

An owner may require a tenant to deposit money as security for performance of the rental agreement or lease. The deposit is held in trust for the tenant during the time it is held by the owner and remains the property of the tenant. The owner may not commingle a security deposit with its personal funds. Commingling of the security deposit with the owner's funds may entitle the tenant to the return of the deposit during the term of the lease or rental agreement. Unless the unit rented is located in a building with six or more dwelling units, the security deposit need not be deposited in an interest bearing account. Where the security deposit is maintained in an interest bearing account, the owner may retain one (1%) percent interest per year as an administrative fee. If the owner transfers or sells the building to another individual or entity, the owner must transfer the security deposit to the new owner. For housing accommodations located in areas that are subject to the Rent Stabilization Law or the Emergency Tenant Protection Act, the owner, in most instances, may only insist upon a security deposit no greater than one month's rent. In such cases, the tenant is required to pay additional security to bring up the deposit to one month's rent upon renewal of the lease or rental agreement.

## Right of Tenant to Participate in Tenant's Groups:

Tenants have the right to form, join or participate in the lawful activities of any group, committee or other organization formed to protect the rights of tenants, without interference, harassment, punishment, or penalization by owner. Tenants' groups have the right to meet in any location on the premises which is devoted to the common use of all tenants, in a peaceful manner, at reasonable times provided they do not obstruct access to the premises or facility. This right does not protect wrongful conduct designed to damage the business interests of the owner or activities conducted in an unsafe fashion.

## Termination of Tenancy:

A monthly tenancy or tenancy from month to month may be terminated by the landlord on notice, served before the expiration of the term. Outside the City of New York, the notice is timely if given one month prior to the term's expiration. It need not be served in a particular manner. Within the City of New York, however, the notice must be given at least thirty days prior to the expiration of the term and must be served in the same manner as the papers which begin an eviction proceeding. A tenant may terminate a monthly or month-to-month tenancy in New York City without notice (unless the premises is subject to Emergency Housing Rent Control or New York City Rent Stabilization Law) while outside of New York City a thirty (30) day notice is required. A tenancy for a fixed duration does not require notice to terminate. Leases may contain provisions for termination sooner than the date fixed for expiration of the term. Such provisions generally require specification of the reasons for earlier termination of the lease and the date on which the lease is to terminate. After such date or after expiration of the time permitted in the Notice of Termination, an eviction proceeding may be commenced.

## The Mechanics Of a Landlord/Tenant Action

### Holdover V. Non-Payment Action:

Generally, an owner or landlord can bring two different kinds of landlord-tenant lawsuits: a) A non-payment proceeding, and b) a holdover proceeding. The legal papers that are served upon the tenant must clearly indicate whether the proceeding is a non-payment proceeding or a holdover proceeding.

### Non-Payment Proceeding:

In a non-payment proceeding, the landlord is demanding that the tenant pay back rent or vacate the premises (in which event the tenant remains

liable for the rent). If the tenant pays the rent demanded, the tenant can remain. Before a non-payment proceeding is begun, the landlord must make a proper demand for the rent. In certain circumstances, the rent demand can be made orally by the landlord. A written demand must state the amount of rent due to the landlord. The written demand should state a breakdown of the rent due by month and should also state any amount due for any other items such as legal fees. The demand must state that a legal action might be started by the landlord in the event the monies are not paid.

### **Tenant's Defenses in a Non-Payment Proceeding:**

The tenant may have certain defenses to a non-payment proceeding. Common defenses to a non-payment proceeding are a) rent has been paid; b) the amount of rent owed is disputed; c) a breach of the warranty of habitability (see above); and d) service of the court papers was not correct as required by law. The payment of all of the rent (and "added rent," if any) owed is a complete defense to a non-payment action.

### **Holdover Proceeding:**

A "Holdover" is a Summary (expedited) Proceeding where the landlord has declared that the tenancy has ended, either because a Lease has ended or after notice. Holdover proceedings are also brought to terminate lesser rights where a greater interest is terminated such as evicting tenants when a landlord lost his property through foreclosure or subtenants where the primary tenant has lost its rights to the property. Unless the occupants have an unexpired Lease, the landlord does not have to have a reason for the termination. Unless a tenant can show a Lease or statutory right to cure a landlord complaint, once a Holdover proceeding is commenced, there is no way for a tenant to "cure" and revive the tenancy.

A variety of notices are required for the different types of holdovers. Some proceedings do not require a notice, such as where a written agree-

ment has ended and no further rent has been accepted. Where the party bringing the proceeding was not the landlord, notices are ten (10) days and where the parties have an oral agreement from month-to-month, statutes require at least thirty days (in New York City) or “at least” one month elsewhere. Even longer notice periods apply for certain rent regulated tenancies. Except for termination of oral tenancies outside New York City, a notice to end a tenancy must be written and needs to be served using strict rules set out in the statutes. The termination notices for oral tenancies must end with a rental period (i.e., a notice terminating a monthly tenancy will demand that a tenant vacate on the last day of the month).

After any required notice, a Notice of Petition and Petition is served at least five (5) days but not more than twelve (12) days before the date the parties are required to appear in court. Outside New York City, a landlord can be given a judgment on default, but in New York City, a hearing (“Inquest”) is held before a judgment can be granted.

### **Warning to Tenants:**

A tenant should never ignore legal papers, even if the tenant believes that he or she has been improperly served. The tenant must go to court when directed and immediately raise defenses he or she might have. If a tenant ignores legal papers, the court might enter a default judgment against the tenant, award the owner a warrant of eviction, evict the tenant, and get a Marshal or Sheriff to seize the tenant’s bank accounts, salary or other property. It is possible for the court to enter a money judgment against the tenant if the tenant does not appear in court when required, unless the tenant is either an active member of the Military Service or dependent upon a person in the Active Military Service. A tenant should be aware that it is important to consult with a lawyer with knowledge of landlord-tenant law in their locality because of the complexity and variety of issues involved in the landlord-tenant relationship. Tenants should know that local bar associations often have referral services to knowl-

edgeable attorneys. Also, free legal advice may be available in your area. For example, in New York City, the Housing Court provides “pro se” attorneys who provide advice on court procedures. Also, Legal Aid and Legal Services organizations may be helpful.

*This pamphlet, which is based on New York law, is intended to inform, not advise. No one should attempt to interpret or apply any law without the aid of an Attorney. Produced by the New York State Bar Association in cooperation with the Real Property Law Section.*



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