

## Marin tenants group forming to fight for rights

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Marin County tenants are meeting Saturday in San Rafael to complete plans for a new committee to advocate for their rights and for safe and affordable housing.

At the meeting, scheduled for 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Pickleweed Park Community Center, participants will iron out the details of a new countywide committee - from giving it a name to deciding the term length for its 11 members.

If the nitty gritty of the new group has yet to be determined, its mission is clear: advocating for affordable rentals, tenants' rights and healthy and safe living environments.

"Whenever people in power are discussing housing issues, (it's important) that tenants are taken into consideration," said Olivia Beltran, a coordinator with the Grassroots Leadership Network of Marin.

Since February, the San Rafael organization has held monthly meetings to gather comment from the community and to nurture new tenant leaders. About 40 people have participated in the five meetings held to date; some had never spoken in public or taken notes in a meeting, Beltran said.

"Through this process, they expressed that if there's an issue that they feel has to be on the table É they'll drive it," she said.

The new committee will also provide assistance to tenants who have been hesitant - or unsure how - to report unsatisfactory living conditions.

In her role as an organizer for tenants' rights, Beltran has seen instances of deplorable conditions.

Lisa Argento Martell, a San Rafael resident who participated in the organizing meetings, said linking people up with resources is critical.

"There are situations of people living with infestations or mold, and they have landlords who won't do anything about it," she said.

Martell, a molecular biologist, said she became involved in tenants' rights after being unfairly evicted from a rental and struggling to navigate her way through different support organizations.

"I can't even fathom what a single mother of four is dealing with," Martell said.

Lucy Apffel, former president of an association of Marin rental property owners, said not all landlords operate like that.

"When I prepare a place to rent, the first question I ask is, 'Would I live in it?' If I can't live in it, no one should," said Apffel, who served for about 10 years as president of Marin Income Property Owners Association, made up of more than 100 members.

Apffel said she was curious to attend Saturday's meeting to learn what the tenant organizers have planned.

One plan that's on the agenda is a tenants' resource guide containing contact information for key Marin organizations. The Grassroots Leadership Network of Marin plans to distribute that guide later this summer and to hold a housing forum.

### MEETING

The Marin tenants' organizing meeting will be from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturday at the Pickleweed Park Community Center at 50 Canal St. in San Rafael. For details, call 847-5958.

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