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Agencies offer renters help

By Carol Youngs
Special to The Journal

Having a problem getting a security deposit returned? Can't get the guy in the apartment above you to stop chanting at 3 a.m.? Consider calling The Community Dispute Resolution Center before calling the police (if you're not in immediate danger).

"We solve upwards of 200 cases per year," said Paula Smetanka, assistant director of the center. "Our services are No. 1 easily accessible (volunteer mediators come to you or you can visit the office) and convenient. We can attempt to resolve your landlord/tenant issue with a mediator and both parties present, or we can conciliate. Conciliation involves a mediator phoning back and forth between the parties. There are no income restrictions. Anyone can use our services."

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An area agency that works just for the benefit of the under-privileged is Tompkins/Tioga Neighborhood Legal Services. "Our services are for those who satisfy set income eligibility requirements. Our clients primarily come to us living in unsafe housing environments or are in immediate danger of losing housing. We also help those faced with losing power or heat because of financial circumstances," said Senior Attorney Alicia Plotkin.

According to Cornell University's Office of Residential Life, the college does not become involved in landlord/tenant disputes, but it screens a suggested list of landlords given to students who inquire. Landlords are only added to Cornell's list if a compliance check with the city turns up no outstanding issues.

At Ithaca College's Off-Campus Residential Life office, landlord/tenant issues often don't come up. Students live on campus for the first three years, after that they can

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opt to stay off-campus. Ithaca College provides a list of landlords, but it is up to the student to check out a potential landlord.

Cornell Cooperative Extension offers preventive solutions. A monthly forum addresses consumer issues with a presentation, followed by a Q&A with the speaker. The next one is scheduled for Wednesday, Oct. 18. That month's topic doesn't relate to landlord/tenant issues, but during the noon to 1 p.m. Q&A period members of the public can pose questions about their situation to the speaker, who is well-versed in the law.

The most common landlord/tenant dispute is landlords keeping or only partially refunding the security deposit, CCE's Ann Gifford said. The City of Ithaca has a rule that security deposits must be returned within 30 days; for the rest of the state the law only stipulates a "reasonable time."

"The very best thing is to walk through the apartment on move-in day and take inventory and photos. When you move out take a second set of photos," Gifford suggested. Both parties should sign off on the inventory of nail holes and appliance condition. "A good lease is the best thing for both parties," she said.

CCE's staff can't give legal advice, but they can review possible outcomes and options.

The Community Dispute Resolution Center's Smetanka said, "We encourage tenants or a tenant/landlord to come to us first before using the court system or other avenues. Mediation or conciliation offers a process whereby both sides can have a say — all parties can more easily gain clarity in a situation with the presence of a neutral third party."

Carol Youngs is a freelance feature and marketing content writer. She may be reached at CYoungs1@twcny.rr.com.

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