

Rent increases, evictions up in immigrant communities under Trump, housing lawyers say

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When Maria got an eviction notice telling her she had to be out of her Redwood City apartment by late February, she thought something seemed fishy.

She contacted housing attorneys, who confirmed to her landlord that the notice was not served legally and she didn't have to move out right away.

Her landlord responded with a text message threatening to call immigration authorities on Maria if she didn't comply, saying it was a "duty" to report anyone who is undocumented.

A second text from the landlord referenced Maria's attorney, Daniel Saver, who works for an East Palo Alto nonprofit law firm.

The landlord warned of reporting Saver to the State Bar of California "for helping his clients who illegally live in the United States of America," according to text message correspondence Saver sent to a legislative committee in March.

The text continued: "I believe the State Bar of California will be interested (in) my complaint, under the new leadership of our president."

"This has gotten pretty pervasive," said Saver, a lawyer at **Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto**.

Even before Donald Trump's presidency, landlords across California were capitalizing on the state's tight housing market by jacking up rent, delaying costly health and safety repairs and evicting tenants to move in higher-income renters, housing attorneys say. But since Trump took office, they say, tenant harassment, intimidation and discrimination have gotten worse – especially in immigrant communities throughout California, from Los Angeles and the Central Valley to the Bay Area and Sacramento.

"It isn't anything new that immigrant tenants are threatened by landlords, or that they're fearful about complaining about unhealthy conditions or asserting their rights," Saver said. "What has changed now is the tenor of those threats and the brazenness of landlords who make those threats. That has shifted in the Trump era. This is not anything we've ever seen before."

Backing up lawyers' reports with specific data is difficult. No agencies track data on the reasons people are evicted or loss of housing due to someone's immigration status. And immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented, are reluctant to come forward out of heightened concern that they, or their family members, will face repercussions. The Sacramento Bee agreed to use the pseudonym Maria, which Saver used in his testimony, because she is fearful of being identified by immigration authorities.

State Sen. John Moorlach, R-Costa Mesa, said he isn't surprised tensions are running high. He said the state shouldn't "protect illegal immigrants and keep them in housing when we're trying to find housing for legal residents."

"There's always a concern that illegal immigrants are taking jobs from U.S. citizens," Moorlach said. "Now we have an issue of them taking housing away when it is getting so expensive, and our young kids are moving out of the state because of it."

State and federal fair housing laws, however, cover undocumented immigrants and make it illegal to discriminate against someone based on their race, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, disability and more. Still, some state lawmakers say California must strengthen tenant protections.

Estimates show California is home to roughly 2.5 million undocumented immigrants.

"Most of them are renters, and landlords almost always know the immigration status of their tenants. They are even more vulnerable than other low-income tenants because they have this fear of being deported or their landlord reporting them to Immigration and Customs Enforcement," said Jith Meganathan, an attorney and policy advocate with the Western Center on Law and Poverty.