



## **A Way Back Home: Richmond's Eviction Diversion Program and What it Means for Landlords and Tenants**

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In April 2018, the New York Times reported the grim results of a study that analyzed 83 Million eviction records across the United States. Led by Princeton professor Matthew Desmond, a team of sociologists identified communities with the worst-of-the-worst outcomes for low-income individuals who couldn't make their rent payments.

Richmond made the podium with the second-highest per capita eviction judgment rate in the U.S., second only to North Charleston, S.C. The study reviewed 2016 eviction judgment data, which show that, through legal action, landlords were given the right to remove one in nine renter families in Richmond, and that as many as one in five were threatened with eviction during that same period. Over thirty percent of all Richmond renters receive a notice of eviction in any given year. Sadly, homes with children are evicted at roughly twice the rate of families without kids. Eviction creates a chain reaction that takes a toll on families and communities, causing problems in schools, problems with access to social services, and disruptions to the aid that needy families rely on to make ends meet. Eviction, as one legal aid lawyer put it when giving a comment to the Times, "isn't one problem. It's like 12 problems."

Mayor Levar Stoney announced in late January 2019 that Richmond would pilot the Commonwealth's first ever eviction diversion program, which was agreed to by landlord groups as well as tenant advocates.

The key components of the program, as described by the City, are:

- It enlists attorneys to act as pro bono in-court mediators between would-be-evictees and their landlords;
- It provides for a payment plan where tenants re-pay their arrearages without having to leave home;
- For tenants who qualify, it provides financial assistance for payment of back rent to landlords; and
- It provides financial literacy education to families in need.

Unresolved questions about the program remain. Virginia HB2655 and SB1450, which were offered in January 2019 and which passed in both the House and the Senate, shed some light. The goals of the program are to reduce evictions for non-payment of small amounts of rent and to provide vulnerable renters with financial literacy to help them avoid the pitfalls that often lead to evictions.

**Why it matters:**

For renters and their families, this program provides a much-needed way out of the crises that evictions lead to. For landlords, it provides a new means of enforcing rights without bearing the cost of pursuing an eviction action and without bearing the burden of enforcing an eviction judgment.

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