

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

Eviction is still a threat during the pandemic. Here's one story.

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CABIN RADIO – APRIL 08 – 2020

Link: <https://cabinradio.ca/34273/news/yellowknife/eviction-is-still-a-threat-during-the-pandemic-heres-one-story/>

Nobody wants to lose their home during the Covid-19 pandemic, and many landlords are trying to help tenants. But the NWT hasn't formally banned evictions, and there are still circumstances where they are a threat.

A Yellowknife man and his family were nearly left without a place to live until he received last-minute help from the territory's housing authority.

Dennis Chicot's story demonstrates how circumstances that existed before the pandemic can come to a head at precisely the wrong time.

Chicot, his common-law partner, and their five young children live in an apartment they rent from YKD Property Management. Early last month they were told to pack up and leave by April 1 unless he could pay overdue rent, clean up his parking stall, and commit to being a better neighbour.

Chicot said he was working to meet those conditions but couldn't pay his arrears in full before March 30.

His landlord gave him a one-week extension, but told him to find another place to live.

Chicot was scrambling until late last week, when – with help from Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green – he was able to get assistance that will allow him to stay in his home.

Chicot knows he came close to being forced to find somewhere new to live in the middle of the pandemic. Being able to stay is "really great," he said.

Green declined to speak with Cabin Radio, saying "work on behalf of individual constituents is confidential."

'Then comes this Covid-19'

According to a March 4 rental office decision, Chicot owed \$4,300 – about three months' rent – to YKD Property Management. He previously owed \$7,300 but paid \$3,000 just prior to the decision.

Chicot said he kept working to pay off the arrears and brought the total down to \$1,150, but paying the rest was a challenge with the Covid-19 pandemic. Chicot shovels snow and picks up and delivers goods, among other jobs.

“I had bookings for almost the whole week,” he said. “I was filled right up and then comes this Covid-19. A bunch of people called me back and cancelled their booking.”

The rental office decision states Chicot’s landlord shared photos of items like shovels, a mattress and boxspring, carpet roll, and tool boxes, stored by Chicot in a “haphazard manner” in his parking stall.

“When I go to the dump I usually find stuff that other people don’t like, then I take it and try to fix it up,” Chicot explained.

“Lately I’ve just been so busy with work I never got around to it, and it’s just been sitting there, being an eyesore.”

Chicot said he wasn’t able to clean out the stall on his own before April 1, so someone else was hired and the bill for the work was added to his arrears.

He was upset to find the workers had disposed of a hardwood desk he was planning to sell to help pay rent, as well as a new generator and tools.

Chicot said he went to the dump shortly afterward (while it was still open to the public) and was able to recover some of his tools, but the rest of the items were gone.

The landlord told the rental office other tenants had complained that Chicot’s young dog was “urinating and defecating” in the apartment hallway. There were complaints of other disturbances, including claims Chicot yelled at staff and knocked on his neighbours’ doors after they complained about his dog.

In her decision, the rental officer said she had been told “neighbouring tenants are afraid.”

“I guess people were complaining about the kids being loud,” Chicot said. “I was like, well, kids are loud. Kids will be kids.”

While Chicot understood he was being asked to get rid of the dog, the decision stopped short of that, stating the dog must cease causing disturbances that affect other tenants or the landlord.

Process began in January

Charles Wynam, representing YKD Property Management, declined to speak about Chicot’s situation but said the company regularly works with tenants if they’re having trouble paying rent.

"It's a rough situation for everybody," Wynam said of the Covid-19 pandemic. "For us, we typically work with our tenants to [address] the situations they encounter in their regular life and I don't see why this situation will be any different."

Wyman said evictions take months to plan. In his view, any taking place now wouldn't be related to the pandemic.

"If there were anybody in that position I don't see why it wouldn't happen," he said.

In Chicot's case, an application by YKD Property Management was made to the rental officer on January 15 seeking payment for rental arrears, termination of the tenancy agreement, and eviction.

Call for evictions freeze

Several territorial politicians have asked for evictions to be put on hold during the pandemic.

MLAs on the NWT's Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight passed a motion last week recommending the territorial government suspend residential tenancy evictions for 90 days.

Among those MLAs was Frame Lake's Kevin O'Reilly.

"I've had a few constituents raise this with me personally," he said. "People are going without income but rent is still due and they find themselves in difficult situations."

O'Reilly also wants the territorial government to support small landlords who rely on tenants' rent to pay their bills. He had hoped that would come before April 1, or rent day.

"That didn't happen, so I'll be continuing to watch to see what happens and then push the issue," he said.

Premier says evictions issue being discussed

Speaking to Covid Corner on Tuesday, NWT Premier Caroline Cochrane said her government had not yet decided to pause evictions.

"We haven't made that determination. We have been talking about it," Premier Cochrane said, though she noted the NWT Housing Corporation will not carry out evictions in public housing during the pandemic unless there is a "significant matter," including risk to other tenants or the building.

"It would be really easy to say, 'Let's make a law that says no one can evict.' That would seem logical to people and that might work for big organizations that have multiple apartment buildings," said Cochrane.

“How would that work for the one person who has a roommate? What does that do for you as a small landlord, financially, that only has the one person?”

“It’s a little bit more difficult than people think, but it has to be discussed.”

In cases where there are concerns beyond not being able to pay rent, O’Reilly pointed out the rental office helps settle issues by mediation.

Rental office services are still available by phone and email. In-person hearings are being rescheduled to take place by teleconference.

The housing corporation is still processing applications for the homelessness assistance fund, which provides one-time emergency funding to those at risk of becoming homeless.