Stoney announces new evictions task force

By MARK ROBINSON Richmond Times-Dispatch
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Mayor Levar Stoney on Wednesday announced the formation of task force focused on curtailing evictions in the city.

“I am counting on this group to explore steps the city can take to better understand, mitigate and prevent the conditions that make our most vulnerable residents, including our children, susceptible to housing insecurity,” Stoney said in a release detailing the task force’s formation.

Stoney named public housing residents, tenant advocates, nonprofit executives, civil rights lawyers, city administrators and academics to the group. The panel is scheduled to meet Dec. 2.

Richmond landlords evict tenants at the second-highest rate in the country, a 2018 analysis by the Princeton University Eviction Lab showed. The finding started a statewide discussion of how to get a handle on what leaders have called an epidemic.

In the meantime, evictions in the city have persisted at a pace that prompted advocates to redouble their efforts on the issue.
Last month, they spotlighted the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority for seeking to evict 1 in 8 families living in Creighton Court, a public housing community in the city’s East End. Dozens of other families living in public housing faced the same fate, too, some for as little as $50 in back rent.

In response, RRHA announced last week that it would halt evictions against its residents for the remainder of the year. The freeze would coincide with an effort to bring current residents of public housing into good standing if they owed back rent. Damon Duncan, the housing authority’s CEO, will take part in the city task force, according to the release.

The task force will bolster the efforts of the city’s new eviction diversion program. Stoney proposed, and the City Council funded, the program in the budget that took effect July 1.

The Stoney administration is working with the nonprofit Housing Opportunities Made Equal, the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society and the court system on the program. It is meant to help tenants avoid the stain of an eviction judgment on their record and the instability that can follow.

Tenants who qualify for the program are eligible for rental assistance, financial counseling and pro bono legal advice. The Stoney administration expects the program to aid hundreds of families.

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