

**COMMENTARY**

**Don't keep renters in the dark on foreclosure**

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BY **ANN FISHER**

Albert Douglas was working on a New Year's Day feast when his landlord dropped by, as usual, on the first day of the month.

And, as usual, Douglas was ready with his cash payment. Despite having been unemployed since November and dealing with the pressures of Christmas, the 33-year-old father of two boys prides himself on that payment.

He's also the sort of guy who wishes everyone he meets a "blessed day," so it's easy to imagine that, after handing over the rent money, Douglas did the same for his landlord.

What I can't fathom is how that must have felt for the landlord who knew that, because of him, Douglas' world could soon fall apart.

Although the Columbus property had been in foreclosure since June, two months before Douglas moved in with his 13- and 14-year-old adopted nephews, the landlord had continued to collect the rent without telling him. Douglas and others like him have no protection from such exploitation.

A proposed Ohio House bill could help by requiring landlords to tell prospective and current tenants about pending foreclosures and current tenants about planned sheriff's sales. The proposed law also would give tenants at least 30 days to move out after the sale.

House Democrats have made the bill a priority, and help can't arrive too soon. An estimated 30 percent of foreclosures are on tenant-occupied properties, according to a Cuyahoga County study by Policy Matters Ohio. A similar study of Franklin County is due out in a few weeks.

*Dispatch* reporter Jim Siegel wrote last week that Ohio had the seventh-highest foreclosure rate in the nation last year, with an estimated 90,000. A similar number is expected this year.

Douglas learned the bad news in mid-January, when a stranger dropped by to ask questions about the building -- any leaks, how well does the plumbing work, that sort of thing.

When Douglas asked about the fellow's interest, he was told about the foreclosure and that the building would be up for auction in two days, on a Friday.

Two days after the auction, the water pipes in an adjacent unit burst, flooding the building. The next day was Martin Luther King Jr. Day, so city offices were closed. A code-enforcement officer arrived on Tuesday and condemned the property.

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Douglas had no money for rent or a security deposit and nowhere to go anyway.

Still, as the quote by an unknown author goes, "Hope is like a bird that senses the dawn and carefully starts to sing while it is still dark."

First, he drove around until he found a nearby unit for rent, so his boys wouldn't have to leave Dublin schools. The new condominium is bigger and nicer. Even better, the first month's rent was half-price.

Then, Douglas learned about a one-time grant available through the city for folks who are forced from their homes when the structure is condemned. Finally, he persuaded his former landlord to fork over the security deposit.

The new condominium was ready in a day. He picked up the key. After a week like that, even the snow and cold didn't bother Douglas on moving day.

"I don't even see it," he told a friend. "To me, it's a sunny day."

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