

More than 100 eviction cases at Hyde Park apartment complex could leave a lasting mark

By **Tim Logan** Globe Staff, Updated June 21, 2021, 9:28 a.m.



Shelley Liriano, a resident of the Georgetowne apartment complex, talked about her struggle to raise three children including a newborn, and face the possibility of being evicted. JOHN TLUMACKI

Before COVID-19, Amanda Pichardo had a solid job as a nurse assistant, a daughter in Boston Public Schools, and an apartment at Georgetowne Homes in Hyde Park.

When the pandemic forced schools to close, Pichardo had to quit work to stay home with her daughter. Suddenly, paying rent became a challenge. She applied for rent relief, she

said, but that application fell through the cracks of a state bureaucracy [overwhelmed by tens of thousands of applications](#). By March, despite having gone back to work, Pichardo still owed about \$2,000 in back rent.

That's when her landlord took her to Housing Court, seeking an eviction for nonpayment.

Pichardo's is one of at least 113 such cases filed in March against tenants of Georgetowne Homes — one of Boston's largest privately run affordable housing complexes — by its owner, Beacon Communities. Most have been resolved and dismissed, with tenants successfully tapping [the gusher of rental aid](#) flowing from Beacon Hill and Washington, D.C. A handful, including Pichardo's, are nearing a similar resolution. Few if any tenants will lose their homes.

But the ramifications of this short-term crisis could resonate for a long time. As public records, eviction cases are searchable by potential future landlords, credit agencies, or anyone else — even if they are quickly settled.

“These eviction filings come with real consequences,” said Steve Meacham, organizing coordinator at tenant advocacy group City Life/Vida Urbana. “They're a black mark on your record.”

In January, Governor Charlie Baker vetoed legislation that would have sealed eviction cases in Massachusetts, agreeing with landlord groups that said the measure was too broad. Since the state's eviction moratorium ended in October, his administration has poured money into rental relief programs, doling out \$153 million since March 2020 to [more than 28,000 households and their landlords](#).

But what happened at Georgetowne, advocates say, highlights some of the holes in that program, and the danger of falling through one.

A windy cul-de-sac of town houses near Stony Brook Reservation. Georgetowne is home

to many Black and Latino single parents. Most residents receive rent subsidies in the form of Section 8 vouchers, with the amount they pay out of pocket tied to their income.



Even before Beacon Communities filed eviction cases against 113 tenants at Georgetowne Homes, residents had complained about conditions there. Anelore Jacques, for instance, cited peeling paint as one of the problems. JOHN TLUMACKI

Because of the pandemic, many lost their jobs, or they no longer had the child care and in-person schooling for their children that enabled them to work. While Massachusetts closed housing courts for much of 2020, unpaid rent still accumulated. Beacon, one of several big affordable-housing operators [that signed a “no-evictions” pledge](#) in October, geared up to reach out to tenants and connect them with rent relief programs.

“We knew we had a lot of people who were struggling to pay rent,” said Beacon CEO Dara Kovel. “We worked through the summer, the fall, the winter to try and reach out to them.”

That meant e-mails, phone calls, fliers, and letters. Metro Housing Boston, which processes state rent relief applications, ran workshops and has helped more than 200

households at Georgetowne since the start of 2020, said executive director Chris Norris.

But if people don't complete their applications, Norris said, there's only so much Metro Housing can do.

"We find residents don't respond," he said. "Or once we've started, they don't follow through with the information we need."

Tenants tell a somewhat different story.

Pichardo was one of several interviewed by the Globe who said they dropped off paperwork at Beacon's office, but never heard back. Income certifications — key to determining rent payments — were miscalculated or not updated to reflect lost jobs. Case workers came and went.

"It was e-mail after e-mail, phone call after phone call, trying to get answers," said Shelley Liriano, a resident who contracted COVID-19 while pregnant in December and had to stop working. "I was stressed. I don't know if I'm going to get evicted."

Eventually, Beacon tried new ways to get tenants' attention, Kovel said. In February, it sent "notice to quit" letters — the first step in an eviction — to dozens of tenants the company had been unable to connect with. The next month, in the span of a few days, Beacon's lawyers filed 113 eviction cases in Eastern Housing Court, one for \$100.

People soon took notice of the flurry of filings.

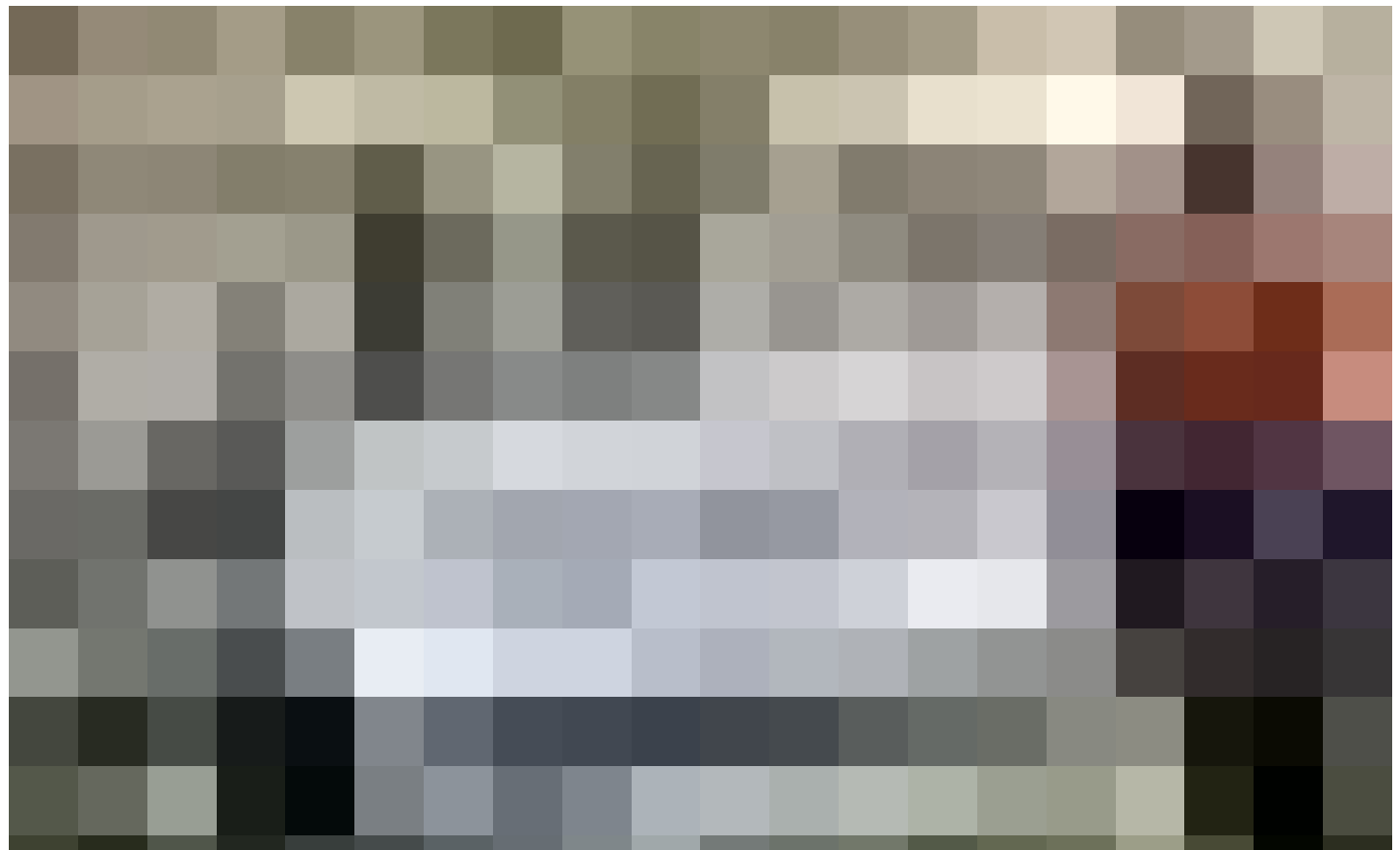
Despite warnings since last summer of a "[tsunami of evictions](#)," [relatively few cases have been filed](#) in Massachusetts since the moratorium ended in October. Seeing so many from a single property, in the span of a few weeks, set off alarm bells. The Massachusetts Alliance of HUD Tenants — which has long worked with tenants at Georgetowne — started making inquiries. Greater Boston Legal Services jumped in to represent tenants. City officials, who had asked Beacon to sign the no-evictions pledge last fall, had questions.


“They told us their motivation [in filing suit] was to get the attention of residents who weren’t responding,” said Sheila Dillon, the city’s chief of housing. “We suggested that probably wasn’t the best course of action.”

Yet in a sense, it worked.

Most of the tenants Beacon sued in March have successfully applied for state aid programs. Pichardo expects to hear any day on an application she submitted with the help of her attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services. Liriano — who said Beacon is still trying to sort out what her monthly rent should be — has filed a new application as well. She’s hopeful that the money will come through but worries what the episode will do to her credit long term.

“I was really trying to avoid going to court,” she said. “I’ve been trying to buy a home. Now I’m going to be tainted. That’s kind of out the window.”





Anelore Jacques, (left) a resident for 21 years at the Georgetowne Homes is upset about the lack of repairs by the management of the complex. She holds a sign with resident Marcella Jones during a rally at the complex to bring attention to the living

conditions and evictions. JOHN TLUMACKI

Her predicament could have been avoided, said Michael Kane, executive director of the HUD tenants group, if Beacon and its attorneys had held off on filing in court and redoubled efforts to reach struggling tenants. But when lawyers are involved, he said, legal action is the default.

“They’re all trained to evict, evict, evict,” Kane said. “That shouldn’t be.”

A few major landlords, such as WinnCompanies, have started [efforts to reduce the number of eviction](#) cases they file. That starts with more focus on outreach and mediation long before anything ends up in court. But they acknowledge that court is sometimes unavoidable.

Even then, said Rachel Heller, CEO of affordable housing advocacy group CHAPA, there are ways to minimize the long-term impact of an eviction case on vulnerable renters. A new version of the vetoed bill — which would seal eviction records while cases are pending, and if they don’t result in a final eviction — is back on Beacon Hill. And, while landlord groups remain concerned about what it might mean for their ability to screen tenants, Heller said she’s optimistic something can be worked out.

“This sort of thing should not follow people for the rest of their lives and make it harder for them to find homes they can afford in the future,” Heller said.

Beacon’s Kovel agrees.

Taking tenants to court should always be a last resort, Kovel said, noting that Beacon waited months before filing the Georgetowne cases. She said Beacon supported the eviction-sealing legislation last year and in a recent letter to Greater Boston Legal Services, the company offered to “help lead a coalition” to advocate for it. An eviction case shouldn’t be a financial black mark for life, she said.

“Until we figure out how to reach the tenants that are hard to reach, the court process is the only way for us to get to sit down with them,” Kovel said. “Is it the best solution? No. But currently it’s the solution we have.”

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