



Tenants gather at rally ahead of an L.A. County Board of Supervisors vote on providing free attorneys to renters facing eviction.

Los Angeles County’s Board of Supervisors unanimously voted Tuesday in favor of creating a plan to provide free attorneys to low income renters facing eviction. The policy — which still needs a final vote before it is scheduled to take effect on Jan. 1, 2025 — would be the first of its kind in Southern California.

It comes at a time when lapsed pandemic renter protections have caused a spike in eviction filings leading to [thousands losing housing](#).

“Housing is a fundamental human right,” said Sup. Holly Mitchell, who first [introduced the idea for a “Right To Counsel” program](#) last year. “I believe that our county’s Right To Counsel ordinance is an important part of fulfilling that vision. And we’ll have an L.A. County where, regardless of income, every Angeleno will have access to affordable, accessible legal services.”

Who would be eligible for a lawyer?

The program will only serve renters in [unincorporated parts](#) of L.A. County. That includes areas such as East Los Angeles, City Terrace and South L.A. neighborhoods like Florence-Graham.

Why just the unincorporated areas?

Supervisors have limited influence over the 88 incorporated cities within L.A. County. But if you live in an unincorporated part of Los Angeles County, such as Altadena, Castaic, East L.A., Ladera Heights, Rowland Heights, South San Gabriel or Willowbrook, the Board of Supervisors is basically your city council.

- You can find a list of all 125 unincorporated communities [here](#).

The plan also sets income limits on who can receive an attorney. Tenants will need to have a household income of 80% or less of the area’s median income. Under current guidelines, that comes out to \$77,700 for an individual or \$110,950 for a family of four.

County officials estimate it will cost \$24.5 million to launch the program. Initially, the legal aid will be funded using federal pandemic relief money. But when that dries up, the county will need to find a new funding stream.

Pablo Estupiñan, director of the Right To Counsel campaign with [Strategic Actions for a Just Economy](#), said future funding could come from a [November ballot measure to raise sales tax](#) for homelessness and housing programs. If L.A. County voters approve the measure, he said, some of the revenue could be set aside for the county's Right To Counsel program.

"Studies that have been done have shown that Right To Counsel saves money, because there's less of a burden on the county to pay for homeless services," Estupiñan said, pointing to [results showing cost savings from a similar program in Cleveland](#).

What landlords think of the plan

Landlord groups have opposed plans to pay for tenant-side lawyers, saying that money would be better spent providing rental subsidies to struggling renters.

"When permanent funding is identified, we urge the county to use the funds to pay the rent for low-income renters to completely avoid eviction, rather than attorneys' fees to merely delay eviction," said Janet Gagnon with the [Apartment Association of Greater Los Angeles](#).

Data from inside L.A. courtrooms show that the vast majority of landlords have attorneys, but the vast majority of tenants do not. Unlike in criminal court, defendants don't have the right to an attorney in civil eviction proceedings if they can't afford one on their own.

A [2019 report](#) by the consulting firm Stout found that 97% of L.A. County renters lacked an attorney in unsealed eviction proceedings, while 88% of landlords had legal representation. The report was commissioned by the L.A. Right To Counsel Coalition.

Why tenants say the playing field is uneven

Tenants who've represented themselves in court describe feeling like they're fighting on an [uneven playing field](#).

At a rally ahead of Tuesday's vote, a tenant who goes by Nela said she was evicted from her apartment in Highland Park over a dispute with her landlord over how much rent she owed. She said she is now unhoused and does not want to use her full name because it could jeopardize her search for new housing.

Nela alleges that her landlord illegally raised her rent multiple times despite [the city's ban on increases](#) in rent-controlled apartments during the pandemic. She said she tried to find a pro bono attorney, but none were available. She felt confident in her case, but said the judge kept telling her to get a lawyer.

"The court rules are very esoteric, and they're hidden on purpose," Nela said. "You can be very smart. You can be highly intellectual. When you walk into that courthouse, you're not an equal to someone who's that familiar with the court rules."

L.A. would follow in other cities' footsteps

Right to counsel programs already exist in cities such as San Francisco, Philadelphia and New York. Advocates point to results from New York showing that since the policy took effect, eviction filings have dropped and the vast majority of tenants

connected with an attorney stay housed. However, the city has also [struggled to connect tenants with attorneys](#) because demand often exceeds the number of lawyers available.

L.A. County's ordinance states qualified tenants would receive help "subject to the availability of funding." If demand outstrips resources, the L.A. County Department of Consumer and Business Affairs would have the authority to prioritize legal aid based on criteria such as a tenant's income level and whether they live in a neighborhood with higher risk of displacement.

Currently, tenants needing legal assistance with an eviction can reach out to [Stay Housed L.A.](#), a consortium of legal aid providers funded by the county and city of L.A. Due to limited resources, that program primarily serves tenants within certain priority zip codes.

The [city of L.A. is also considering a right to counsel](#) ordinance, potentially funded by the ULA tax on real estate selling for more than \$5 million. That proposal has yet to be scheduled for a vote.

Resources for renters facing eviction

Tenants who need help or advice can contact local legal aid organizations through [StayHousedLA.org](#). However, local eviction attorneys say they're being inundated with requests. If you can't find an attorney, there are other resources that may help.

- [TenantPowerToolkit.org](#) can help you quickly respond to a filing in eviction court, as described earlier in this guide.
- L.A. County runs [Self-Help Legal Access Centers](#), where tenants representing themselves in eviction court can seek legal information from trained attorneys.
- The Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles hosts regular eviction trial workshops. You can sign up through [StayHousedLA.org/workshops](#) or by calling 888-694-0040.
- The [Eviction Defense Network](#) also holds workshops regularly. You can join those workshops via [Zoom](#) or by calling 214-485-8112.