

KEEP DETROITERS IN THEIR HOMES PROJECT

COHORT CASE STUDY

Advancing a Collaborative, Community-Centered Approach



"Our goal is to keep Detroiters in their homes now and in the future. We work together to obtain equitable, community-centered, systemic solutions."

– Tonya Myers Phillips, public policy advisor, Michigan Legal Services

Coalition Partners: Michigan Legal Services, Congress of Communities, Detroit Action, and the Wisdom Institute

Background

Residents of Detroit were facing an eviction crisis of epic proportions even before the pandemic, with over 31,000 evictions filed and only 4% of tenants receiving legal representation in 2017. [In 2019, more than 10,000 writs of eviction were signed](#), allowing court officers to remove tenants and their personal belongings from rental properties. During the pandemic, the federal eviction moratorium, legal aid, and rent assistance helped prevent evictions, with the number of signed writs of evictions falling to [2,428 by July 2020](#). Yet as the federal moratorium approached its end in August 2021, advocates were becoming increasingly worried that as many as [116,000 households in the Detroit, Warren, and Dearborn areas could face evictions or foreclosures](#).

The Detroit Rental Assistance Program was a resource for renters facing evictions, but many people did not know the program existed. Program administrators and court officials relied heavily on digital communications and virtual meetings to spread information about the program, although only 40% of Detroit households have

access to broadband internet. City officials and court offices had not tapped into effective "neighborhood information and resource networks" to convey information through trusted community messengers, and Detroiters accounted for only 22% of those applying for rent help across the State of Michigan. Meanwhile, by [January 2022, the program had approved only 31% of the applications \(17,182 in total\)](#). The process for receiving assistance took anywhere from three to 10 weeks.

Mobilizing Neighborhood Information and Resource Networks

The United Community Housing Coalition (UCHC) and its partners launched the Keep Detroiters in Their Homes (KDITH) Project to advance and expand the work being done by Detroit tenants and residents, nonprofit and legal aid organizations, Detroit officials, and the courts to keep Detroiters in their homes. The group involves collaboration between United Community Housing Coalition (UCHC), a Michigan-designated Housing Assessment and Resource Agency and contracted provider of emergency rental assistance (ERA); Michigan Legal Services; and three

community-based BIPOC-led agencies (Congress of Communities, Detroit Action, and the Wisdom Institute). The KDITH project organized, trained, and supported Detroit tenants and homeowners, conducting on-the-ground advocacy, outreach, partnership development, systems change, and policy reform to shape Detroit’s ERA program in the short and long terms and build support for a right to counsel.

The KDITH team worked with a diverse group of people, including those with lived experience of housing instability, to conduct outreach throughout the city regarding how to access ERA and legal representation. Part of that outreach was linking people to backpay and utility assistance offered by UCHC. KDITH utilized proven on-the-ground techniques, such as door-knocking, flyering, and phone-banking, as well as business-to-business outreach and outreach conducted by its network of trusted messengers to inform thousands of Detroiters about ERA and prevent numerous evictions. The organization undertook targeted outreach via mail and canvassing to over 3,500 households, many of them households for which an order of eviction had been signed and that were likely to be evicted by a bailiff within 10 days.



Tanesa Sanders, lead organizer for Detroit Action, leaving legal help flyer for those facing eviction

The team also directly engaged with ERA program administrators, community advocates, and stakeholders to better coordinate efforts to avoid going to court to receive ERA and to work with networks of landlords to voluntarily utilize single points of contact at UCHC to resolve multiple pending evictions in their properties through ERA agreements.

To advocate for the establishment of a right to counsel in Detroit, the team organized even more intensively until it succeeded in assembling a broad, diverse citywide coalition, the Detroit Right to Counsel Coalition. The effort included working with a national firm to conduct a right-to-counsel cost and benefit study. The team also conducted focus groups and individual interviews with Detroit residents in danger of eviction. It convened community meetings in which participants discussed how a right-to-counsel ordinance could help residents facing eviction. Moreover, in late September 2021, the team gave a presentation to members of the Detroit City Council. In the period after the presentation, the team held eight meetings with Detroit policymakers. Following these meetings, a local right-to-counsel ordinance was introduced.

ERA Program Improvements

The Keep Detroiters in Their Homes Project improved access to and distribution of ERA by addressing multiple barriers, including low levels of trust in government institutions, lack of targeted outreach to those who were most vulnerable, and widespread language barriers. KDITH encouraged residents to keep submitting applications until the very end of the application process, developed a targeted outreach list, informed residents of opportunities to resolve their cases, brought messages to community members in safe spaces, and worked with bilingual canvassers to conduct relational organizing in predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. As a result, UCHC disbursed nearly \$49 million in ERA from the \$274 million allocated to the Detroit Metro Area through the fall of 2022, while also reducing bailiff evictions by 20%.

Passage of a Civil Right to Counsel

The Detroit City Council unanimously voted to pass a right-to-counsel ordinance in May 2022

– the first of its kind in Michigan and only the eighteenth in the nation. The ordinance provides a right to full legal representation for persons whose household income does not exceed 200% of the Federal Poverty Limit. The ordinance also provides free legal representation to homeowners facing foreclosure eviction and residents victimized by illegal lockouts, while also providing funds for community outreach.

The advisory firm Stout has [shown in a recent report](#) that tenants with full legal representation are 18 times more likely to stay in their homes and avoid disruptive displacement. The report estimates that investments in the right to counsel for Detroiters will generate \$3 for every dollar invested. Since being launched in March 2023, Detroit’s right-to-counsel program has been awarded \$18 million in local American Rescue Plan Act funds, which will be disbursed over three years. On the basis of this level of funding, attorneys will be able to represent approximately 6,000-7,500 residents per year. Ultimately, the program will need \$27 million annually to provide legal help, outreach, and supportive services to the 30,000 Detroit residents estimated to face evictions until filings substantially decrease, as has been seen in other jurisdictions with right-to-counsel measures in place.

Looking Ahead

In 2023, the KDITH project will organize, train, and support tenants to conduct on-the-ground advocacy, outreach, partnership development, systems change, and policy reform to create and enforce permanent tenant protections in the City of Detroit. The project aims to (1) obtain full funding and equitable implementation of the Detroit right-to-counsel ordinance; (2) establish a permanent eviction diversion program with the local district court and community organizations; (3) create guides and/or publications on equitable engagement, community leadership, and the use of collaborative organizing models to enact legislation and achieve policymaking goals; and (4) establish a story bank and dedicated forum for tenant/resident leaders to lead and influence future housing justice policies.

Tenant Story

A young Detroit mother responded to UCHC’s outreach letters. In her case, a writ of eviction had been applied for, and a default judgment had been entered. But just days before the bailiff was scheduled to evict her and her young children, UCHC intervened, paying off her back rent, as well as three months of future rent until she was able to go back to work.

End Rental Arrears to Stop Evictions (ERASE) 2021 – 2022 Cohort

[NLIHC’s End Rental Arrears to Stop Evictions \(ERASE\) 2021-2022 Cohort](#) was a group of 38 state and local nonprofit partners that conducted on-the-ground partnership development, capacity building, outreach and education, policy reform, and systems change work to ensure that emergency rental assistance (ERA) funds reached renters and small landlords with the greatest need for assistance - especially Black and Indigenous people and people of color, and other marginalized people and communities - and to build support for long-term housing solutions.