

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

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COMMENTARY

We can be grateful that no wave of evictions has occurred since the moratorium was lifted

Rental assistance programs played a role in keeping evictions down, But we should not overlook another important contributing factor: Illinois housing providers.

For over a year, so-called “experts” predicted an “eviction tsunami” once Gov. J.B. Pritzker lifted Illinois’ eviction moratorium. A Google news search for “eviction tsunami Illinois” returns almost 5,000 hits.

The tsunami didn’t happen.

Only a few dozen evictions were filed in the six-county Chicagoland area in the first days following the end of the eviction moratorium, according to an NBC-5 report.

Our state and local rental assistance programs certainly played a role in keeping evictions down, and our state and local leaders are to be congratulated for overseeing some of the most successful rental assistance programs in the nation.

But we should not overlook another important contributing factor to the tsunami that wasn’t: Illinois housing providers.

It’s easy to cast the landlord in the role of the greedy, wealthy bad guy, but the reality is at odds with this false narrative. Most people rent from their neighbors — small and medium-sized housing providers who are often individuals and “ma-and-pa” businesses.

In fact, these small- and medium-sized housing providers provide most of our affordable housing. According to Harvard University’s Joint Center for Housing Studies, 75% of affordable housing is “naturally occurring,” meaning it is unsubsidized by any government program. These homes are usually older and

often owned by individuals and people of color.

The narrative of the distant, faceless landlord doesn’t match the reality of the vast majority of housing providers who know their tenants personally and have bent over backward during the pandemic to accommodate their tenants who found themselves in tough financial straits.

This narrative doesn’t square with the reality in which a third of Chicago area housing providers are in peril of foreclosure because of falling rent collections.

It doesn’t reflect that half of all Chicago-area housing providers are unable to make capital investments to maintain their properties and often struggle to make basic repairs.

Our policymakers need to acknowledge the valuable role played by neighborhood housing providers. Rather than demonize them and impose punitive regulations that drive up the cost of providing housing, our legislators need to look for ways to support our small- and medium-sized housing providers.

At a minimum, we need to celebrate the tsunami that wasn’t and thank our housing providers, whose sacrifices over the course of this pandemic kept people safely housed.

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