

How A Rise In Tenant Activism Reflects Growing Concerns Among D.C. Residents



Gabe Bullard

Hannah Schuster

LISTEN



Residents of the Woodner blocked traffic on 16th Street as they marched to the building manager's house in late August. Among their chants was "No landlords, no cops, all evictions got to stop."

Gabe Bullard / WAMU

Apartments have taken on totally new functions during the pandemic. They've become classrooms as kids log into Zoom courses each morning. They're offices for those who can work from home. Home is where we're told to stay in order to avoid catching the coronavirus. But for a growing number of Washingtonians, home is unaffordable, unsafe and increasingly uncertain.

And as the pressures of the pandemic pile up, more tenants are becoming activists.

Denis Tercero has lived in the Tivoli Gardens Apartments in Columbia Heights for 20 years. He hasn't paid his rent since April, after he lost his job at a D.C. hotel. Tercero and about 30 others recently gathered outside the building owner's home in Georgetown to ask that he cancel

their rent.

“The bigger the group, the stronger you are,” Tercero said.

The day before, about 20 residents of the Woodner — one of D.C.’s largest apartment buildings, where up to 150 of about 2,000 tenants aren’t paying rent — marched to the building manager’s house. They demanded [he cancel their rent](#) and address issues with maintenance and operations.

“We’re going to continue to escalate until they’re willing to come to the table and negotiate with us,” said Sierra Ramirez, who hasn’t paid the \$1,250 monthly rent in her studio apartment since May.

Ramirez says the pandemic was a tipping point for her ongoing frustrations with the building. “The concerns about mold and just the general lack of respect from management have been something I wanted to organize around since I first moved in. But this, definitely, it was a transformative moment for a lot of people,” she says. “We’re just not getting that type of support that we deserve to be getting.”

Another rent strike in the Southern Towers apartment complex in Alexandria has been [growing since March](#), with hundreds of tenants withholding rent. They’ve since visited local lawmakers’ houses to support legislation addressing their concerns.



‘Cancel Rent’ graffiti at 23rd and P Street Bridge

D.C.’s high cost of living was already pushing tenants to protest before the pandemic. But the public health and economic crises have led to a surge in rent strikes and demonstrations.

“Usually you would see like maybe one or two rent strikes happen a year,” says Citlalli Velasquez, an organizer with the Latino Economic Development Center. “Right now, there’s maybe around 14 rent strikes that just started just this year.”

Nearly 60% of D.C. residents rent their homes. More [than a tenth of them did not pay their rent on time or deferred a payment this summer, and the percentages were even higher in Maryland and Virginia](#). The pandemic has hindered their ability to pay while amplifying the health and safety issues of substandard housing. The ongoing protests against systemic racism have also helped frame some tenant protests around the ways racist policies and discrimination have contributed to housing segregation and gentrification.

“The movements are all interconnected,” Velasquez says. “We’re definitely trying to bridge the connection between ‘defunding the police’ and canceling rents.”

These factors have all combined to change the scale and tone of tenant activism. They pushed the phrase “cancel rent” from the political fringe toward the frontlines – painted on bridges, written on banners and popping up in [campaign platforms](#). Even some landlords are looking beyond tenants to keep their mortgages paid, pressing the federal government for rent relief.

Previously in D.C., public health crises, civil rights protests and mass organizing have led to new tenant protections being enshrined in law. Today’s rise in tenant activism hasn’t matched the tenant movements of the 1970s. But as hundreds of thousands of dollars in rent go unpaid every month, and as ever-more tenants approach the breaking point, calls for new relief are louder than ever.

The Pandemic Made A Growing Problem Worse

Even before the pandemic, D.C. was experiencing a housing crisis. [Nearly half of renters are considered cost-burdened](#) – meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on housing. Roughly a quarter of District residents are “severely” cost-burdened, devoting more than half their income to rent.

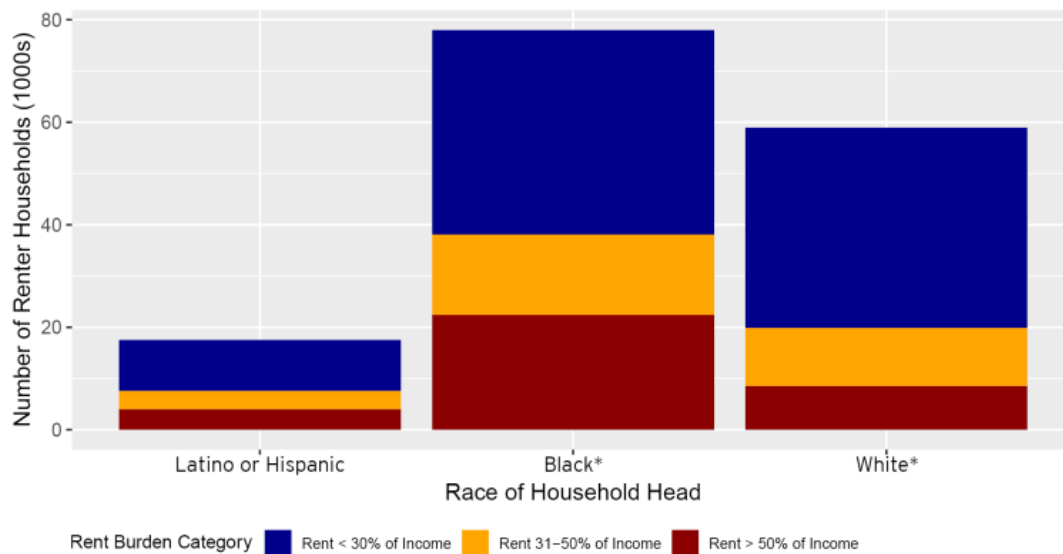
This burden isn’t evenly shared. In D.C., about half of Black and Latino renters were cost-burdened in 2018, compared to a third of white renters, according to an [analysis from Harvard’s Joint Center for Housing Studies](#). Median rent in the area grew 16% from 2008 to 2018, [while renter income grew](#) only 9%. The stock of housing with rent under \$900 a month [dropped precipitously](#), while housing that costs more than \$1,400 per month nearly doubled.

As affordable housing becomes harder to find, gentrification has [displaced low-income D.C. residents](#) at some of the highest rates in the country: Forty percent of D.C.’s lower-income neighborhoods gentrified to some degree between 2000 and 2013.

FIGURE 2

Black and Latino or Hispanic renters have higher cost burdens

Cost burdens among renter households, by race



*Non-Latino or Hispanic
Source: 2014-2018 American Community Survey
Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample.

B Metropolitan Policy Program
at BROOKINGS

Many D.C. residents pay a high proportion of their income on rent. But Black renters, in particular, are burdened by high rent.

This was the backdrop against which tenant organizing grew in D.C. in recent years. Rents were growing and residents were being pushed out; those who remained questioned what they were paying so much of their take-home pay for. The Tenants Union launched in 2019, and the Democratic Socialists of America’s [Stomp Out Slumlords project](#) started in 2017 to centralize and support tenant organizing that was happening. The Latino Economic Development Center also organized rent strikes to fight squalid conditions in apartment buildings.

Then the pandemic hit.

As the local and national economies collapsed, tens of thousands of workers in the region filed for unemployment benefits. More than 500,000 people in D.C., Maryland and Virginia were receiving unemployment benefits as of Aug. 1. Many were buoyed by the additional \$600 a week in federal unemployment insurance, but soon that money dried up. The CDC has put a national freeze on evictions for the rest of the year, but for tenants who are still out of work, this may only suspend the inevitable.

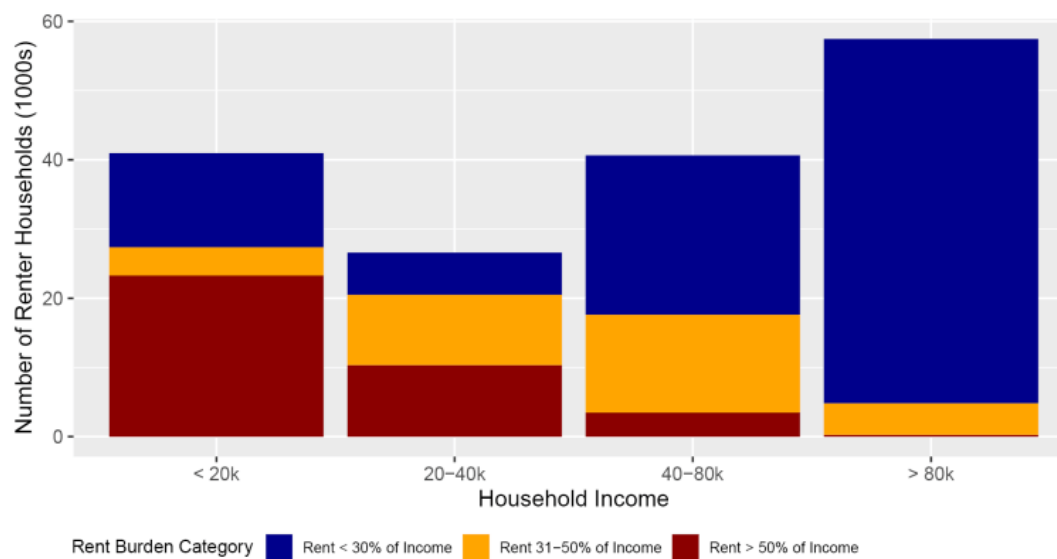
The economic calamity has wrought particular havoc on the service industry and other jobs typically held by low-income workers, leading to further racial gaps in rent nonpayment.

Existing rent relief options have largely been insufficient to match the scale of the crisis. Virginia allocated \$50 million in CARES Act money to a rental and mortgage assistance fund, but advocates have said it's not enough. [One estimate](#) suggests renters in the commonwealth owe at least three times that — \$170 million — in outstanding rent payments.

FIGURE 1

Housing cost burdens are highest among low-income renters

Cost burdens among renter households, by income group



Source: 2014-2018 American Community Survey Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample.

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Lower-income renters are more significantly cost-burdened in D.C.

In D.C., [Brookings estimates it would cost \\$5.2 million a month](#) to cover rent for those most in need. The D.C. Council has passed one of the strongest eviction bans in the country, as well as other tenant protections. The District is requiring landlords to consider alternative payment plans. But payment plans in many cases add another level of debt.

“If you owe six months of back rent and you could barely pay your rent before a payment plan, a payment plan will in-debt you to this building for a really long time, maybe forever,” says Nick McClure, a tenant and organizer at the Woodner. “And if you can’t pay your rent, then you can’t get a good reference for another building ... It’s putting a lien on people’s freedom, essentially.”

Beyond Fighting Bad Conditions, Calls To Cancel Rent

Rent strikes have traditionally taken aim at poor building conditions like mold, broken heating systems or rodent infestations. Plenty of tenants who are striking now are demanding their landlords improve conditions. But in large part, ongoing strikes are centered around calls to cancel rent because tenants simply cannot afford to pay.

“Certainly some buildings have really bad conditions,” says Amanda Huron, a professor at the University of the District of Columbia who studies affordable housing and works as an organizer with the Tenants Union. “But in many cases, the tenants aren’t saying, ‘Conditions are bad, therefore we’re withholding rent, we’ll pay you when you get the conditions fixed.’ Tenants are saying, ‘We actually can’t pay rent at all. Ever.’”



Tenants of the Woodner apartment building held a protest on Aug. 29 to ask management to cancel rent during the pandemic and to meet other demands.

In addition, some tenants in buildings have decided to withhold their rent in solidarity with their neighbors. “This is a matter of me using my privilege to help people who are in a bad spot right now,” McClure says. “I think [striking in solidarity] is a great step forward in terms of the professional class in D.C. doing a little bit more to support the working class that is also their neighbors,” says Kiara Davis, an organizer with the Tenants Union working in Marbury Plaza, in Southeast D.C.

When tenants go on strike, they often set aside rent money in an escrow account so they can pay it back later, but not all tenants can do that now.

“Now I think the real question is, well you can’t pay rent anyway, and so we might as well try and pressure the landlord and organize around rent forgiveness or hold off until folks get taken to court,” Velasquez says.

Beyond demonstrating at their buildings, tenants rally outside of landlords’ and lawmakers’ homes — large, public demonstrations that show the gap between a landlord’s multimillion-dollar home and tenants who can’t afford a moldy studio.

Activists have mobilized to provide physical barriers against landlords promising to carry out illegal evictions, too. In July, dozens of people — wearing masks and chanting “Housing is a human right!” — [gathered outside a house in Chillum, Md.](#), where three roommates said their landlord was going to evict them despite protections in the state.

One of the protesters in Chillum drew a clear line between that action and larger protests against systemic racism that erupted this summer.

“We have a united cause against racial capitalism, against the police as an occupying force and against the forms of oppression that systematically form around that,” Oluwemi Taiwo, a member of Pan-African Community Action, said at the protest.

The Connection To Other Protest Movements

Protests spread throughout the country after Minneapolis police killed George Floyd, but the demonstrations have led to broader reckonings with systemic racism — well beyond policing. Protesters have called attention to racial disparities in areas like housing, education and health care. The widespread demonstrations “have really shown that massive social unrest is possible,” says Stephanie Bastek with the Tenants Union.

While not every rent strike is part of the broader racial justice protest movement, there are connections to be found.

“I think that the current activism you see around police brutality, around defunding the police, I think is rooted in response to the same systems that created the current housing crisis,” says Mychal Cohen, a research associate with the Urban Institute.

The present-day housing crisis, Cohen says, is closely linked to decades of disinvestment in communities of color and policies that were “deeply racist in origin.” The pandemic has only escalated efforts to combat displacement of Black and Brown residents, giving this activism a greater sense of urgency.

Velasquez, with the Latino Economic Development Center, agrees. “I think one of the biggest connections [to housing movements] ... we’ve seen in the calls to defund the police is to reinvest in communities,” she says, “It’s like defunding the police and reinvesting into housing.”

Velasquez also notes that marshals carry out evictions in D.C. while in most states it’s the sheriff’s department. As Woodner residents blocked a lane of 16th Street to take their rent strike public, they chanted “no landlords, no cops, all evictions got to stop,” among other phrases.

“The two [movements] are deeply entwined,” says Davis with the Tenants Union. Davis notes that the Black tenants in D.C. have been “exploited for decades. And so we’re seeing the culmination of that happening not only to black residents, but it started to spill over into other parts of the city where people are being priced out due to urban renewal or gentrification.”

This summer has also seen other protests aimed more directly at housing and racial justice. The organization Empower D.C. held a “Black Homes Matter” rally in July to demand that lawmakers prioritize issues like public housing repairs in the budget for 2021.

“We had seen, you know, the mayor had “Black Lives Matter painted on [the street],” Daniel del Pielago, the group’s organizing director says, “However, we weren’t seeing that play out in the budget. The budget wasn’t, you know, providing the amount of support and relief that really affects Black lives, that affects Black homes.”

Only an hour before activists started to gather, council chairman Phil Mendelson announced he would propose some additional funding for public housing repairs.

Empower D.C. works with public housing residents. Del Pielago says the pandemic has put a “bigger spotlight” on the conditions inside public housing.

“Something we’ve been saying for years is that ... public housing residents have already been living in a public health catastrophe,” del Pielago says.

Empower D.C. started asking residents to send in pictures of where they had to quarantine. “Residents were sending us pictures of walls covered in mold ... rats running into their cooking pans.”

Civil Rights, Tenant Protests And Hard-Won Victories

In D.C., tenant activism, civil rights and even public health have often overlapped. Washington’s first rent control law grew, in part, out of the 1918 flu epidemic, Huron says. The city had seen an influx of residents due to the first World War, and housing was cramped. Congress, whose members include many renters, [passed the Ball Rent Act](#), which created a committee to regulate rent in the city.

“If you look at the testimony in Congress about the attempts to get this rent control law passed, there’s a lot of reference to the pandemic and to these greedy landlords who were evicting people, sick people, in the midst of a pandemic,” Huron says.



Residents of Clifton Terrace, a D.C. apartment, staged a rent strike in the 1960s because of poor conditions in their building.

The Ball Rent Act faced numerous challenges from landlords and only lasted a few years. Four decades later, modern tenant activism grew in the District, and it was closely linked to the Civil Rights movement.

In the mid-'60s, rent at 1414 Girard Street was only \$90 a month, but the building was infested with rats and roaches. Plaster was crumbling from the walls and ceilings, and a "trash heap replaced what used to be a front yard," according to a [1983 report from the University of D.C.](#) A woman named Karen Schuler, who lived on Girard Street with her five children, was the first to withhold her rent in late 1963, the study says.

Come January, her landlord got a court order to evict for nonpayment. That's when Schuler's son sought help from the Nonviolent Action Group — a student organization at Howard University affiliated with the national Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

When marshals came to evict the Schulers, these students staged a sit-in and "blockaded" the apartment, Huron says. And they convinced the other eight families in the building to withhold their rent, as well.

"Young Black college students were really involved in supporting rent strikes from a racial justice perspective," Huron says.

Those families ultimately lost their case in court and were evicted. But tenant activism continued to flourish in D.C. over the next decade.

Later, residents of Clifton Terrace went on strike against a landlord who was once prosecuted and jailed for 60 days over housing code violations, according to the UDC study. In 1970, tenants won a long-lasting victory: An appeals court ruled that, in a residential lease, there's something called "implied warranty of habitability," which means landlords are required to keep the place safe and livable.

Huron says this decision, in some ways, legalized the rent strike as a tactic for change. "It's saying, look if the place isn't up to snuff, then you don't have to pay rent," she says, adding, "All that organizing that went into those rent strikes is what changed the law further."

The surge of activism continued in the 1970s, as residents grew worried about gentrification — or, as they put it, the "Georgetownization" — of historically Black D.C. neighborhoods. "The Washington Post declared in 1978 'the year of tenant revolt,'" Huron says. The protests of the '70s, as well as new home rule laws for D.C., brought about rent control and the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA), which remain on the books today.

Victories like this helped to reshape housing in the District, but they took years of protests. "At this point," Huron says, current protests "can't really compare to what was going on [in the '70s], but I'm mean, we're sort of at the beginning of it in some ways."

Landlords Seeking Relief

The path to new protections for tenants often runs through landlords, and it's rarely a smooth trail.

When talking about the role of landlords, Huron shares a story of tenant unrest from 1977. Sixty-three residents of a Glover Park apartment building got eviction notices on Christmas Eve. "And when he [the landlord] showed up at the building finally to talk to the tenants, he was wearing boots that were made of the skin of an endangered animal," Huron says. "And he went into the meeting with the tenants and his driver sat in the car and let the engine keep running for the entire time he was in the meeting."

Not every landlord is a caricature more apt for Dickens than D.C., but the optics of a rent strike aren't often kind to them: Dozens of individuals who pay four figures for apartments plagued by mold gathering in front of a multimillion-dollar mansion is a striking image. (Woodner residents chanted "out of the castle and into the streets" at their building manager's house). And some landlords' actions can enforce these perceptions. Despite moratoria in place, some have made plans to evict nonpaying tenants. Beyond [the attempted eviction in Chillum](#), tenants [have reported getting threats of eviction](#), and, when allowed, landlords have [begun preparing the paperwork](#) to kick tenants out. And landlords [have fought against measures in the D.C. Council](#) to further restrict not only evictions, but also the issuance of eviction notices, saying the legislation is too broad.

At root in these efforts is a business proposition — landlords need rent money to pay mortgages on apartment buildings and to keep the buildings in order. Small, "mom and pop" landlords, too, can suffer tremendous loss of income or even foreclosure themselves, if they don't have revenue (though some property managers [have received federal payroll protection grants](#)). The scale of the economic crisis, however, has led many property managers to look beyond tenants for this revenue.



The Cancel Rent rally in Columbia Heights on July 25, 2020, organized by the DC Tenants Union.

"This isn't something where I think any of our members are disconnected from what's happening," says Randi Marshall, vice president of government affairs for the Apartment and Office Building Association of Metropolitan Washington (AOBA). Marshall says the association is encouraging its members "to engage our residents to make sure that they feel that not only is the management and the property owners actually hearing the residents out, but what are we doing to work together with them in order to make things more affordable?"

"A lot of that has to do with the work that we do on the government side," Marshall adds.

The building association, Marshall says, has been working with the D.C. Council on rental assistance, but the city, like many states, is strapped for cash. Instead, federal rent subsidies present a more viable answer, though not one that has yet moved significantly in Congress. If it happened, it could mean payments to renters to cover back rent, or payments to landlords to cancel bills for struggling tenants.

“I think a lot of our members would care less about who actually is getting the funds in the first place. I think they want to make sure that their mortgages are paid,” Marshall says. The result of a mass crisis in rent, eviction, leasing and eventual foreclosure of apartment buildings could be an even more expensive place to live, as housing scarcity climbs. “The worst thing that you want to see is foreclosure, or you see, you know, a bunch of smaller apartment buildings being snapped up by private equity firms.”

Not every demonstrator sees canceling rent as simply paying landlords, though, or paying tenants so they can pay landlords. “I think that the bailing out of private corporations and private business owners is absolutely deplorable while people starve on the streets,” organizer Kiara Davis says. “It would be a subsidy from the state to the landlord class in which rent is not canceled, but the rent will be paid by the government, which is still going to be a transfer of wealth from the public to the private entity.”

What Does Victory Look Like After This Unrest?

For the immediate term, payments may keep people in their buildings and buildings in the hands of current owners. But while current conditions have made housing in the city worse, they’ve also made it plain that housing in D.C. has become so expensive that a couple missed paychecks can lead to tenants losing their home, wrecking their credit and going into homelessness and debt. Subsidies are a broad, one-time solution. Longer-term fixes will be needed to fix the underlying issues the pandemic exacerbated.

“There is also an opportunity to revisit other housing solutions that we have moved away from,” says Mychal Cohen with the Urban Institute. He mentions the Housing Choice Voucher Program, which is designed to help low-income individuals not only make rent, but to rent apartments in neighborhoods they previously couldn’t afford to live in. While many landlords in D.C. [do accept vouchers](#), the program isn’t funded to the level it would take to be a widespread solution.

Public housing, too, “has a certain rap within the American context of being really poor quality housing,” Cohen says, “but part of that is the sort of defunding of public housing” that has happened over decades.

Proposals to rethink housing have begun gaining some traction. The platform of Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden [includes a plank](#) to extend vouchers so no families are rent-burdened. But these are small, early signs that the message of inadequate housing is spreading.

“I think the more public pressure happening, the more coordinated organizing occurring, the more likely these solutions will make it into policy conversations at the local and national level,” Cohen says.

There’s also the issue of tenant protections. Might the current wave of protests grow to the point it inspires the next level of legal protections for tenants? It’s hard to say. But in the short term, a victory for tenants now would be a powerful first step, and possibly an even more powerful symbol.

Stephanie Bastek, an organizer with the Tenants Union, says any new protections that have arisen in the last six months — even if it’s not enough — are a direct result of tenant activism, including the CDC eviction ban and local protections.

“Anything we won in this city, or in this country, that is there to protect tenants has come about because of militant tenant organizing with the real threat of social unrest, and disruption,” she said.

Last week, management at the Park 7 Apartments in Northeast D.C. distributed a flyer to residents offering them. It offers them the possibility of some rent forgiveness: Rent payments will count double — so if residents pay \$100, they’ll get a \$200 credit. And if tenants pay rent in full between October and February, any remaining balance will be forgiven, the note says.

Bastek described this as the strongest rent forgiveness program she’s seen, but says residents aren’t all ready to get on board. It won’t help everyone, she says, plus tenants still have serious concerns about building conditions and whether management will even be true to its word when calculating payments.

The building is owned by prominent local developer Chris Donatelli, who, last year, had to [pay \\$450,000 to hundreds of Park 7 tenants](#) for improperly charging them for water usage, even though lease agreements said the cost was included in rent.

Shawn Rochester, a Park 7 tenant, says the new proposal does nothing for people like him who can’t even afford partial payments, and it doesn’t address issues like the rodents in his apartment, either.

“I’ve been unemployed, so like literally I have nothing to do but... make sure that I’m staying on top of my cleanliness of my living environment, but like no matter how much I clean, I’m still coming across pests,” he said.

Rochester says he'd already thought about going on rent strike at the beginning of the year, but the pandemic pushed him over the edge.

"I want to see, at the least, for Donatelli to ... give up the management of the building to someone else," says Rochester. "The fact that, after years, those simple demands still haven't been met yet, and there's other issues that have piled on, I think it just shows that (Donatelli's) not taking responsibility."

For now, it seems that tenants throughout the D.C. region will keep striking and keep making noise. After the speeches and protest to cancel rent outside of the Woodner manager's home in August, Mary Imgrund walked back to her apartment. She considered the growth of the building's rent strike and the momentum around the movement.

"If we can cancel rent at the Woodner," she said, "we can cancel rent anywhere."

This story originally appeared on [DCist](#).

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Gabe Bullard

Gabe Bullard is a senior editor at WAMU. Prior to joining the newsroom, he was the director of digital content for WAMU's 1A, and a member of the team that helped launch the show.