

Dear mayors and city/town councilors:

We are told that our municipal governments are dedicated to improving “quality of life for our residents” (Woonsocket), are “committed to providing the highest levels of customer service to the residents we serve” (Pawtucket), and that the future is “looking even brighter” (West Warwick). **That has not been our experience as tenants of slumlord Pioneer Investments, whom the Attorney General is prosecuting today.** As our homes fall apart, our quality of life does not feel valued by our municipal governments. The highest levels of customer service? Try not being able to get a code inspection even with falling ceilings, flooded hallways, electrical that is hot to the touch, and porches so unsafe postal workers won’t deliver the mail. The future does not look bright when we can fulfill our obligations as tenants but still be kicked out of our homes with only 30 days’ notice. Nor does the future look bright when our children are allowed to be poisoned by lead paint in the year 2023, when RI has had lead safety laws on the books for more than twenty years.

We have been living with atrocious conditions, skyrocketing rents, and the constant risk of eviction with nowhere else to go. Our children have been irreversibly harmed by lead poisoning. These ills are all preventable, and they happened on your watch. We are calling on you to follow the lead of the Attorney General and start holding slumlords accountable.

In some municipalities, we are unable to get code inspections, and in others, we get inspections but landlords do nothing about violations. In one municipality, we have been discouraged from filing a complaint with code enforcement because we might get evicted. Retaliatory conduct such as filing an eviction after a tenant complains to code is prohibited by law. Something has gone grievously wrong if the agency charged with ensuring safety in homes cannot perform its function. But our agencies are understaffed, fines are not collected, and landlords are free to make us homeless if we dare to ask for habitable homes or engage in collective action with our neighbors.

Cities and towns across the state have allowed slumlords to violate state minimum housing laws with impunity, sometimes despite the best intentions and sometimes because of absolute indifference. We have seen this firsthand time and time again. Pioneer owns properties across Rhode Island, particularly in Pawtucket, Central Falls, West Warwick, and Woonsocket. We applaud Central Falls for their leadership on addressing slumlord conditions and call on all municipalities to work with Pioneer Tenants United and Reclaim RI to draft a plan to strengthen enforcement of existing laws and to draft and pass into law new anti-slumlord ordinances.

It is concretely possible to eliminate slumlords from our cities and towns. We call for the following anti-slumlord measures to be enacted NOW:

- **Accountability:** Create a municipal rental registry listing up-to-date lead certificate status, unremediated code violations, and insurance standards. Contract with a debt collector so fines levied on landlords are actually collected and paid into a repairs fund.
- **Housing Security:** Require renewable one-year leases (with some exceptions), end evictions without good cause, and enforce the prohibition on retaliation so tenants are free to exercise our right to complain and to organize (R.I. Gen. Laws §34-18-46).
- **Health and Safety:** Fund *proactive* code enforcement. Ensure that the buildings where people live meet minimum housing standards *before* kids get poisoned and people learn how to live with leaks and no heat.
- **Clean Hands Eviction:** If a landlord can't maintain their properties in accordance with minimum housing standards and lead safety laws, they shouldn't be allowed to evict people. Tenants should be able to pay rent into escrow until properties are remediated.
 - Note: Slumlords combine the tactics of substandard conditions and constant eviction in order to maximize profits from their “portfolio” of “investments”—at the cost of the wellbeing of the real people who call those investments home.
- **Market Rate? Market Value:** Stabilize rent increases and also limit rent when substandard conditions are present. Runaway rents are devastating our communities, and slumlords take advantage of people with no other options to price gouge for substandard apartments. Put an end to this by stabilizing rent and tying it to conditions.

All Rhode Islanders have a vested interest in combatting slumlords, because we all want to live in safe, thriving communities. **We would like to meet with you in the next several weeks to make a plan to strengthen existing enforcement and pass new ordinances designed to eliminate slumlords.** Work with us, people directly affected by some of the worst harms of the housing crisis, to ensure the quality of life and bright futures to which our cities and towns are supposed to be dedicated.

Sincerely,

Pioneer Tenants United
Reclaim RI