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A go-to voice for landlords

KELLY KEARSLEY; Staff writer

The down economy has meant brisk business for Landlord Solutions, a Tacoma-based company that specializes in eviction services.

President and founder Jim Henderson Jr. said more property owners are finding themselves being shorted rent, so his business is up 10 percent this year from last year. He wouldn't reveal annual revenue.

While most people think of eviction as one step – the one when a person's belongings are removed – it's actually a weeks-long process. Henderson's three-person company charges fees for helping landlords through it.

The company's services include ensuring that notices are served properly, working with attorneys to guide the landlords through the court system, and sometimes working with the sheriff's department if a tenant's belongings must be removed.

The News Tribune recently sat down with Henderson to learn more about his company, its work concerning evictions – and to glean any advice he has for new landlords.

What exactly does Landlord Solutions do?

We assist landlords by facilitating the eviction process for them. We also do tenant screening, and we have a service called rent watch where we collect tenants' monthly payments on behalf of the landlord. But evictions are 80 percent of our business.

How do the evictions work?

It's on a case-by-case basis – either the property manager or owner would call us and they typically they say "My tenant hasn't paid rent." That's the most common problem. We find out from them whether they have given a notice to pay or vacate – that's called a three-day notice. Then if they haven't, that's something we can start.

Do you physically do the evictions?

We don't do very many physical evictions; most (tenants) finally get it and move on their own. I would say less than 10 percent actually push it that far. But we've done them in the past and we do them on occasion. Typically what we do when we've done them is we've just hired a crew and been on site to manage that crew as they remove all the personal property, with a sheriff's deputy there doing civil standby.

Do you give legal advice?

We are not trained in the law, so we are not allowed to give legal advice. No attorney is needed to start a three-day notice. Once an eviction starts, all of our clients are represented by an attorney.

Ninety percent of the questions we get are not legal questions, but questions about how to manage a property and how to manage tenants.

What common misconceptions do your clients have?

For us, it's not just saying, "Here's how the process works," but it's also telling them, "Look, you are the landlord and you are owed rent. You don't have to accept stories or wait for the rent." How many weeks can you afford to wait? It's sometimes kind of getting them to move on that and do something.

And time is the big issue?

What's not on the side of the landlord is time. The (eviction) process takes up to 6 1/2 weeks – that's essentially two months of unpaid rent on top of how many months you haven't received rent.

What mistakes do you see landlords making?

Often they think they sent their tenant a letter or an e-mail telling them they owed rent. They don't realize that there's a formal process that you have to go through that the court has laid out. Most of our clients don't do an eviction but every couple of years, so they haven't done this for awhile.

Is your business busy right now?

We're seeing more evictions and more evictions for property that has been foreclosed on – that's the banks doing the evicting or someone buying a property at an auction and either the previous owner or tenants of the previous owner that are still in the property.

What is your company's workload?

We handle about 125 to 150 cases per month. Those can start with a three-day notice where the rent is then paid and the case is closed, (and) all the way to cases where we go to hearing and the sheriff goes out and does a physical eviction.

When you start an eviction, a number of them will resolve themselves, because again the No. 1 issue is nonpayment of rent. So if the tenant can come up with rent, the landlord is happy to let them stay.

Do you end up feeling like the bad guy?

I feel like I'm the good guy for my client. I know that bad things happen to good people, but we don't get into the particulars of what caused the tenant to miss the rent. It's simply that you can't live there for free – you have to pay the rent.

I'm a property owner – that's how I got into this – so I know the feeling of not getting paid rent, having to make the mortgage payment, having to pay to have an eviction done and then having to go back and turn that unit.

How did you get into this business?

I bought a house in 1994 and then I kept buying more property. There used to be a service in town I used to do my evictions. They were good in the beginning and then over time what should have taken three weeks was taking four or five weeks, so I decided I should learn the process myself. Then I thought I

could do this as a business. My dad had some property and his friends did as well. They gave me a shot. And it grew from there. Now we are the only business like this in Pierce County, with the exception of attorney offices.

Do you have any advice for new landlords?

A couple of things: Join a rental housing association – it's the best resource in our state for single family homeowners. Use a good lease. An office supply store lease or one off the Internet isn't adequate because they aren't specific to our state. The other thing is don't wait – once the rent is late, do something immediately. And screen your tenants.

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JIM HENDERSON JR.

Title: President and founder, Landlord Solutions

Age: 34

Work: Provides eviction, tenant screening and tenant payment services. The Tacoma company serves property owners and managers from Snohomish County to Grays Harbor County.

Family: Married, three children

Home: University Place



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