



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Notice of Occupants’ Legal Rights and Responsibilities

This document summarizes some of the legal options that you may have when the owner of a property you live in has not fixed certain problems in your home, as required by the state Housing Code (105 CMR 410.000). **This is not legal advice.** Talk to an attorney before you decide to withhold your rent or take other action described here.

Safe and Healthy Rental Housing:

Rental housing in Massachusetts must meet minimum standards to protect the health, safety, and well-being of occupants. The Housing Code, 105 CMR 410.000, *Minimum Standards of Fitness for Human Habitation (State Sanitary Code, Chapter II)*, is the state regulation that sets these minimum standards. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Climate and Environmental Health’s Community Sanitation Program (CSP) issues this regulation, but the standards are enforced by local health departments.¹ CSP works with local health departments and the public to provide training and technical assistance about the Housing Code. For more information, please see mass.gov/lists/housing-community-sanitation.

Your Responsibility to Keep Your House Safe and Healthy

The Housing Code also has requirements that people living in rented homes or apartments need to meet. There are some problems like pests, mold, and keeping exits clear, that might need the owners and occupants to work together to fix the problem. For example, occupants need to make sure there is no food or garbage left out that could attract pests or keep their belongings out of exit hallways. If the local health department is doing an inspection, either by your request or for another issue, the local health department may tell you there is something that you need to fix. The local health department may issue you an order to correct and give you a certain amount of time to fix the problem.

Your Right to Safe and Healthy Housing and Protection from Retaliation

If you think that conditions in your home are unsafe or unsanitary and may violate the Housing Code, you should inform your landlord first. If your landlord does not adequately address these concerns, you should then contact your local health department. They will conduct free inspections of your home and will order your landlord to fix any violations of the Housing Code. You can find contact information for your local health department by calling your city or town hall or visiting their website. City/town websites are listed at: mass.gov/lists/massachusetts-city-and-town-websites.

Your landlord is not allowed to raise your rent or try to evict you just because you have made a complaint to them or to the local health department about the violations. This is called retaliation, and you may be able to sue the landlord for damages if this happens and you made your complaint in writing (M.G.L. c.186, s.18 and c.239, s.2A).

Your Right to a Hearing

You may ask for a hearing in front of your local Board of Health. You must do this in writing and within the timeframes below. If you send a written request on time to the local health department, a hearing will be held within 14 calendar days. **If you do not make a written request within the timeframes below, you lose the right to a hearing.** The chart below shows the reasons you may request a hearing, and the timeframe you have to send the request.

Reason You May Request a Hearing	Number of Days to Make the Request in Writing
Your home was not inspected by the local health department	30 days from the day you contacted health department
The inspector did not find violations you think exist	30 days from the last inspection by the health department
The inspector did not issue an order to correct violations	30 days from the last inspection by the health department
The inspector did not enforce the order to correct	45 days from when the owner received the order to correct

Within **five days** after the hearing, the local health department is required to issue a final decision on your complaint (105 CMR 410.840). If you do not agree with the decision, or at any point throughout the process, you can file an appeal in housing court.

¹ Depending on your city or town, this may also be called a Local Board of Health (BOH), Local Health Authority, or Inspectional Services Department. This is the local code enforcement authority responsible for enforcing the regulations.

Your Options if an Owner Does Not Fix the Problems

If your landlord does not fix violations of the Housing Code in your home, you may have some options as described below. These are not your only options, but they are common actions that tenants and occupants take in these situations. Before taking legal action, contact an attorney to protect yourself. If you cannot afford an attorney, **you may be eligible for free legal aid services**. Go to masslrf.org to find available options for free legal advice. To find additional information on your legal rights and responsibilities when your landlord does not fix violations of the Housing Code, visit: masslegalhelp.org/legal-tactics or madeuptocode.org.

Option 1: Go to Court

If your landlord does not fix the problems that the local health department ordered them to fix, or if you believe there are problems in your home that may be in violation of the Housing Code, you may also ask a court in your area to order your landlord to correct the problems.

To file a complaint, contact the Housing or District Court Clerk in your region. To find the closest Housing or District Court go to mass.gov/orgs/housing-court/locations or mass.gov/orgs/district-court/locations. These courts deal with cases about residential housing including eviction, property damage, and Housing Code enforcement. For help filing a complaint, you can contact Court Service Centers at mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-court-service-centers.

You can request that the court order the landlord to:

Fix the Problem: You or the local health department may file a petition in Housing or District Court to order the owner to fix the violations of the Housing Code (M.G.L. c. 111, s. 127 A, C). **and/or**

Refund Rent You Have Paid: You can file a complaint requesting that your landlord pay back all or part of the rent you paid during the time that there were Housing Code violations. You can claim either 1) Breach of Warranty of Habitability or 2) Unfair and Deceptive Practices (M.G.L. c. 93A), or both.

For both claims, you will need to prove that your home had Housing Code violations, and that the owner knew about the violations and did not fix them. Breach of Warranty of Habitability can also be filed by the local health department.

Option 2: Withhold Rent Until Repairs are Made

If your landlord does not correct *certain* housing code violations, you may be able to hold back some or all of your rent payment until they make repairs (M.G.L. c. 239, s. 8A). **Save the rent money you withhold**. A judge may require you to pay all or some of it back. If they do and you don't have this money, you may be evicted. If you withhold rent and your landlord tries to evict you from your home, you will need to prove, at a minimum, that:

- The violations may endanger or materially impair the health, safety, or well-being of a tenant or occupant;²
- The rental property owner knew about the violations before you started withholding your rent; and
- You did not cause the violations.

Option 3: Make the Repairs Yourself

State law allows you to use your rent money to pay for certain repairs (M.G.L. c. 111, s.127L), and not pay that amount in rent to your landlord. You cannot withhold more than 4 months' rent in a 12-month period to pay for repairs. If you withhold some or all your rent and use it to make repairs and your landlord tries to evict you from your home, you will need to prove:

- The local health department or court determined that the violations may endanger or materially impair the health, safety, or well-being of a residential tenant;²
- The landlord was issued an Order to Correct for those violations; and
- The owner did not start the repairs (or sign a contract for work) within 5 days after getting the Order to Correct and did not complete repairs within 14 days after receiving the notice of violations.

Option 4: End your Lease Early and Move

If you meet certain conditions, you may be able to end your lease or rental agreement and move out within a reasonable time. Contact an attorney to find out more about this option. If you cannot afford an attorney, **you may be eligible for free legal aid services**. Go to masslrf.org to find available options for free legal advice.

² These are serious violations which include problems such as not having heat, hot water, electricity or gas, or exits that are blocked.