

Couple kicked out of 7 homes in Lee and Collier counties

Melanie Payne • tellmel@news-press.com •
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1:10 A.M. — The bad housing market has turned a lot of people into landlords.

They are reluctant landlords because they can't sell their homes for a decent price, or willing landlords looking to diversify their investment portfolios now that owning property is cheap.

But being a landlord is not a business for the faint of heart. Just ask some of the folks who rented to Deborah Eick.

Since December 2007 seven landlords in Lee and Collier counties have taken Eick to eviction court.

Eick, currently renting a home in Alva, said the places she has rented have had problems the landlords refused to fix. So she and her husband Steven stopped paying rent.

"Every one of my cases is valid. It's a corrupt judicial system that doesn't care about the tenant," Eick said of her evictions.

Russ Lavaja, who rented a new house to the Eicks in Cape Coral in 2007, has a different take on the judicial system.

"Landlords don't have a lot of rights in Florida," said Lavaja, who lives in Chicago.

Eick rented his home for \$2,500 a month, paid a \$1,000 security deposit the first month and never paid again, Lavaja said.

He checked the couple's credit and employment and didn't find any problems.

"When we first met them they were pleasant and nice. That face changed quick," Lavaja said.

By the time Lavaja got the Eicks out of his 3,200 square-foot home they had done \$6,000 in damage to the walls, flooring and plumbing, he said. And the eviction cost him \$2,000 in legal fees.

Paul Howard, president of the Florida Landlord Network, said the legal system is fair to both parties.

It takes 30 days to get a tenant out, Howard said. The problem is that landlords who are kind-hearted let the tenants fall behind a couple of months before taking any action.

Tenants can contest an eviction and pay the rent to the court until a decision is made, Howard said. This shows you are legally withholding the rent for a good reason, not that you don't have it or it's a ruse.

Eick said she didn't pay the money to the court because, "What the judge wants you to do is put money in the fund, but not make the people fix it."

According to Howard, the way to get a good tenant is a good screening.

There are four things to ask, Howard said:

Do they make enough money?

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Do they have a criminal history?

What's their history with previous landlords?

Do they pay their bills on time?

Answers to those questions cost about \$28 using services Howard offers through his company. Not getting the answers can cost thousands.

Most landlords "think they are a good judge of character," Howard said.

"But you can't rely on your intuition. The very worst tenants are the very best liars."

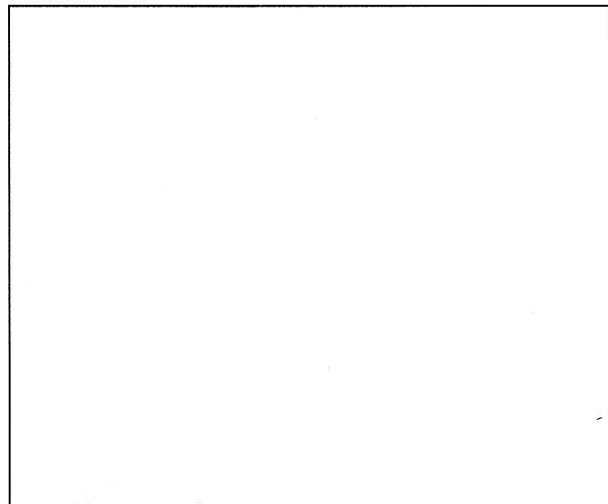
Kerry Cameron said his company dealt with the Eicks in a rent-to-own program in 2008.

Cameron said the Eicks lied on their application, stating they had never been evicted.

Cameron's claim against the Eicks was similar to Lavaja's - he said the family moved in, never paid and damaged the property.

"There are people who figure out how to stay in homes without paying," Cameron said. "The dirty little secret is there is a lot of this going on in today's economy."

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