



October 25-31 is Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Week

Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention week is a good time to review our state's progress on preventing childhood lead poisoning, which is the most dangerous environmental health hazard for our children. The disease is entirely preventable, and experts agree it should be prevented rather than treated since the damage to a child's developing central nervous system is both devastating and irreparable.



Unfortunately, according to data from the Massachusetts Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, childhood lead poisoning rates have increased significantly during the Pandemic. At the same time, testing for lead poisoning has decreased by 75%. These current trends are alarming. Without testing to diagnose lead poisoning, we do not know the extent of childhood lead poisoning to date. Further, without testing, there will be no medical or environmental interventions to reduce or eliminate a child's exposure to active lead hazards—likely increasing the severity of lead poisoning and its long-term consequences.

This increase in childhood lead poisoning is further evidence of the Massachusetts Lead Law's failure to achieve its statutory goal of preventing childhood lead poisoning. As discussed below, the Pandemic has also revealed new ways that the Lead Law operates to harm innocent families with children because of landlord non-compliance with the Law.

The RAFT Program Discriminates Against Families with Children Under Age Six by Forcing Them to Choose Between Homelessness or Exposing Their Children to Lead Poisoning

During the Pandemic, the Massachusetts Lead Law is harming families with children under age six in new ways. Since the



Massachusetts eviction moratorium expired on October 17, 2020, the RAFT program is the state's chief strategy for assisting families who have been unable to pay their rent due to the Pandemic. The RAFT program can now provide up to \$10,000 in funding for back rent to help families avoid evictions. However, the RAFT program will not provide that assistance to

families with children under age six who currently live in dwellings with lead-based paint hazards, unless their landlords delead the unit.

This is an urgent problem for a current client of MFHC. She has three children, two of whom are under age six. She fell behind in her rental payments when she lost her job because of COVID. She applied for RAFT funds at her local Regional Administrative Agency (RAA). As part of the application process, the RAA checked her dwelling's lead status and discovered that a 2011 inspection found existing (unmitigated) lead hazards. As a result of these active lead hazards, the RAA determined that her family is ineligible for RAFT funds. She and her three children are currently at imminent risk of eviction and homelessness. According to the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), which oversees the local RAAs, each RAA can establish its policy about whether to approve RAFT funding for a household whose landlord has failed to comply with the Lead Law's abatement mandate.

This state policy unjustly singles out and punishes low-income families who have suffered a COVID-related loss of income solely because they have a child under age six and their landlord has failed to comply with the Massachusetts Lead Law. MFHC challenged this Law last year because the requirement for landlords to abate lead paint hazards only when renting to a family with a child under age six has caused massive housing discrimination against these families. Landlords have either refused to rent to these families or agreed to rent to them without complying with the Lead Law's abatement requirements. Either way, Massachusetts families with children under age six are the only families to suffer the dire consequences of systemic landlord non-compliance with the Lead Law.

No family with a child under age six should be punished or denied critical housing assistance because of their landlord's illegal acts. Therefore we call on DHCD to provide a policy solution to address the RAFT program's inequities, which harm innocent families with children under age six. These families do not deserve to be treated worse than all other families who need protection from eviction and homelessness during this Pandemic.

If you've had a problem with RAFT due to lead paint, please contact us at (413) 539-9796 or <https://www.massfairhousing.org/get-help>.

Staff Interview: Aaron Levin

Aaron joined the MFHC after graduating

with his J.D. from Quinnipiac University School of Law. Aaron has a bachelor's degree in Theatre and a Master's degree in Mathematics. Prior to attending law school he was a Professor of Mathematics and Statistics at Holyoke Community College for nearly fifteen years and was involved as an employee advocate in the statewide community college union. Aaron is eagerly awaiting the results of the Fall 2020 Massachusetts bar exam.



Hi, Aaron. We're so happy that you were able to join us at MFHC. Since you started on September 17, how has your experience been so far?

Every day is different from the one before.

With housing discrimination, there really is no playbook for how to approach each client's situation to determine the best steps in resolving a landlord/tenant matter. What works in a disability accommodation scenario may be very different from how you would approach a section 8 voucher situation or a problem with lead in the household. Having the opportunity to help each client makes the work so meaningful and is certainly a big highlight of the job. But that is what lawyering should be – helping people.

How have your past experiences prepared you for working at MFHC?

In the past, I volunteered at the Western Division Housing Court assisting tenants with their intake paperwork and participating in mediations of landlord/tenant conflicts. During law school, I was involved with several public interest organizations in western Massachusetts which are dedicated to pro bono representation.

Why is representing victims of housing discrimination important to you?

Providing access to justice to victims of housing discrimination and those in need is more than just advocacy, it provides empowerment, dignity, fairness, and vindication to those whose rights have been treated adversely. Too often, those in most need of fairness and equal treatment under the law are denied access to a lawyer due to the cost, and thus the protection of a person's basic and most fundamental rights, such as housing, is unavailable. The work of the MFHC seeks to improve the lives of the clients it serves, as it brings about the eradication of housing discrimination for the diverse residents of our communities. The mission of the MFHC reflects not only why I made the choice to attend law school but will help me become and advocate for the disenfranchised and oppose policies and practices which would otherwise harm them.

What is the most unexpected thing you've learned?

Previously, I never really paid attention to housing ads, specifically the choice of words that could be used by a landlord to describe the type of tenant desired, and how those words could convey the intent to discriminate. For example, words such as "quiet" or "professional" are possibly trigger words for someone who wishes to (illegally) avoid renting to people with small children. I doubt I will look at a housing advertisement the same way again.

MFHC Receives Grant to Help Holyoke Residents Avoid Eviction

The Massachusetts Fair Housing Center has recently received CDBG funding from the city of Holyoke to help Holyoke residents who are facing housing issues due to COVID-19-related job loss or illness. Please spread the word about this program!



MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING CENTER

HOLYOKE RESIDENTS

**ARE YOU
WORRIED
ABOUT
EVICTION?**

The Massachusetts Fair Housing Center
can provide free legal assistance to
help residents facing eviction due to
COVID-19-related issues.

Please contact us at:
Phone: 413-539-9796 x 101
Email: info@massfairhousing.org

This program is funded in part by a grant from the City of Holyoke with Community Development Block Grant funds from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.



RESIDENTES DE HOLYOKE

¿TIENE PREOCUPACIONES RELACIONADAS CON UN POSIBLE

AVISO DE DESALOJO?

El Centro de vivienda justa de Massachusetts ofrece servicios legales gratuitos a los residentes que están amenazados con un desalojo debido a COVID-19.

Póngase en contacto con nosotros:

Teléfono: 413-539-9796 x 101

Email: info@massfairhousing.org

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Resources for Tenants

With the end of the Massachusetts eviction moratorium, tenants may still be protected from eviction under the federal CDC moratorium. You can find out more about the eviction moratorium [here](#). Here are some other resources that may be helpful for tenants facing eviction:

- [Find out about applying for financial assistance through RAFT or ERMA](#)
- Get help completing a CDC Eviction Moratorium Declaration with the [MassAccess CDC Declaration Tool](#). The Declaration can be given to your landlord at any time.
- If your landlord has started eviction proceedings against you, you can use the [Massachusetts Defense to Eviction program](#) to help you prepare an answer.

DONATE

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