

# No cause evictions hit the end of the line (Column)



Elizabeth Rundo, 75, has lived in her one-bedroom apartment in Forest Grove for about five years. She received a 60-day termination notice of her month-to-month lease in December. (Samantha Swindler/Staff)

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Last October, [Herbert Howard Sahnou](#), 73, pleaded guilty to sexually abusing 12 women, ranging in age from their 30s to their 80s. They were employees and residents of The Elms retirement community, which Sahnou owns in Forest Grove.

The women were groped and fondled by the man whom they relied on for either employment or housing.

Sahnou quietly served [two days in jail](#) and began his five years of probation. But the ripple effects of his crime continue to hit the community.

This time, the housing crisis is claiming victims.

Sahnou is selling off some of his long-held rental properties in Forest Grove. His attorney, Gordon Welborn, wouldn't say whether legal fees and settlements were the reason for his client to sell the properties. But Welborn did say settlements had been reached this month with seven of the eight women who filed civil suits against Sahnou, seeking a combined \$5.9 million.

It's unclear what Sahnou's plans are for The Elms, which is he legally barred from entering. The retirement community's website, which as recently as this month described The Elms as "the Sahnou's family dream," has been removed, and employees of the retirement center refused to answer questions about ownership.

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Sahnou owns dozens of other properties, including a five-property tax lot that sold for \$970,000 on Sept. 21. The sale was first reported [by the News-Times](#). It was purchased by two corporations, Filbert Lancaster LLC & Filbert Pitman LLC, owned by Portland investors.

Several residents of these properties, including at least three tenants of an eight-unit apartment complex on 21st Avenue, received no cause eviction notices. They need to be out by Feb. 15.

Elizabeth Rundo, 75, began renting her one-bedroom apartment from Sahnou about five years ago. He tried to get her to move into the nearby Elms, she said, but it was an extra \$150 a month and she couldn't afford it. Her one bedroom costs her \$650 a month.

She wasn't too surprised by his arrest, based on her own interactions with him.

"I kind of thought there was something sneaky about him," she said.

But she was surprised when she received a 60-day termination notice of her month-to-month rental agreement in December.

Rundo, a thin woman wearing a purple terry cloth bathrobe, sat amid half-packed belongings this week and told me she's unsure of where she'll move. She hasn't found an affordable place. Washington County's [Community Connect](#), which helps people at risk of losing housing, told her she had to call back next week. They couldn't help her until she was at least two weeks away from eviction.

"I am so scared," Rundo said. "I don't even know what to do. Because I can't be homeless. I just can't do that. I mean, I could have done it before I got the cancer, maybe. But I can't do that now."

For anyone facing eviction, it's difficult to find a new place.

Dan Riordan, senior planner with the city of Forest Grove, said he conducted an informal survey this week of apartment listings within the city. Out of 895 total units, only nine were available.

That's a 1 percent vacancy rate in Forest Grove - the literal end of the line for public transportation within the Portland metro area.

When you get priced out of this town, there aren't many options left.

"This is something that is happening across the county," said Katherine Galian, director of family and community resources for [Community Action](#), which staffs Community Connect. "Because the market is really a landlord's market, they can do that right now. They can kick people out, make upgrades, and rent the same unit for a lot more."

In particular, the area is losing what Galian called "naturally occurring affordable housing" -- units like this -- where there are no restrictions on the rent. That kind of housing is going off-line faster than formally subsidized housing can be created. All of the subsidized units in Washington County have wait lists, she said.

It means some people will be unable to afford housing.

"There are around 60 percent who come in through Community Connect for whom there are not resources available at the time," Galian said. "This is the crux of the problem. The need is incredible, overwhelming, and the resources are minimal.

"There are serious holes in the safety net," she said, "and we need to decide as a people 'Are we OK with this?' And if not, then we need to think about how to do things differently."

The Community Alliance of Tenants is pushing for the passage of [House Bill 2004](#), which would prohibit landlords from terminating month-to-month tenancy without cause. The proposed state law still would allow evictions for cause, such as non-payment of rent, and it would allow for exceptions, permitting termination notices if a landlord or landlord's immediate family member is planning to move in, or if a unit will undergo repairs or renovations making it uninhabitable during the process.

That may be what's going to happen to the apartment complex on 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue. The property has long-ignored maintenance issues that need to be addressed. It's understandable that the new owners want to make changes.

But if they can't make those changes without greater protections for their evicted tenants, we all suffer.

"At the end of the day, the externality of these actions, everybody pays for, the entire state pays for," said Katrina Holland, executive director with the [Community Alliance of Tenants](#). "When it comes to public assistance, the dollars don't go as far... I've talked to tenants on the phone who have said 'My doctor will not perform this surgery because I got an eviction and he doesn't know if I'll have a place to recover.' We've heard of domestic violence survivors who are choosing to stay with their abusers. We've heard of teachers who are living in vans.

"Everybody has to pay for it, our kids have to pay for it, the health care system has to pay for it."

There are plenty of elderly people like Rundo. She worked all her life, she said. She didn't have a huge savings, but she'd managed. She never thought she'd be in this situation.

"I don't know," Rundo said. "Just gotta keep my faith. It's hard. Especially when there's not enough money."

"I hope it works out," I said.

"I hope so too, honey."

*-- Samantha Swindler*

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