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Through partnership, Skagit Legal Aid and Skagit County are working to prevent evictions

MILO WHITMAN Skagit Valley Herald
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A photo of Skagit Legal Aid staff.
Submitted by Andy Dugan

With a shortage of affordable housing and many shelters at capacity, preventing eviction is especially important to some organizations in Skagit County.

Since 2021, landlords in the county have filed 814 eviction cases, with a majority of those cases being filed in 2024 and 2025.

Of the 215 eviction cases filed in 2025, Skagit Legal Aid represented about 70% of the tenants.

Skagit Legal Aid is a nonprofit that provides legal assistance exclusively to low-income people in the county.

For Skagit Legal Aid and Executive Director Andy Dugan, providing legal representation to tenants facing eviction has been a focus in recent years.

In addition to representing tenants, Skagit Legal Aid provides rent assistance to tenants through its partnership with Skagit County Public Health.

Skagit Legal Aid is one of only a few organizations in the state that's able to provide both legal representation and rent assistance. This makes Skagit County's model of tenant representation unique and effective, Dugan said.

Though the number of eviction cases filed in the county has risen from 77 in 2021 to 215 in 2025, more tenants are being represented. The percentage of tenants that Skagit Legal Aid represented has risen from 50% in 2021 to 70% in 2025.

Tenant representation has come a long way, Dugan said. Before 2021, about 10% of clients were represented in eviction cases.

This improvement in 2021 was due to the state adopting the right to counsel for tenants, which guarantees free legal representation to tenants facing eviction.

Dugan credited Skagit County Superior Court Judge Elizabeth Neidzwski for implementing the tenants' right to counsel locally.

Neidzwski said that when the COVID-19 pandemic started, the state put an eviction moratorium into effect.

"As there were conversations about preparing to lift the moratorium and allowing eviction matters to start being filed again in court, our court in particular, we were concerned about how to handle what everyone around the state involved in this type of law was describing as a 'tidal wave of backed up eviction filings to come,'" Neidzwski said.

“So we were really proactive in working with all of our stakeholders in this area.”

She said the court worked with the county public health department and organizations such as Skagit Legal Aid to ensure that everyone understood the new law.

Neidzwski said that it was important that everybody was on the same page because eviction cases have high stakes. The cases are usually filed at times when tenants are most vulnerable, she said.

“They often turn out to be some of the most vulnerable within our community — the elderly and families with children — without their basic access to housing," she said. "And then also we have the landlords’ perspective, where if they aren't able to collect rent, they're still having to pay their mortgage and bills, so they could be facing extreme financial hardship as well."

Leading up to this year's state legislative session, Dugan said he was concerned that funding for tenants' right to counsel was at risk. Fortunately, he said, the state legislature decided to continue funding the program.

Since the right to counsel was implemented, tenants’ attorneys and landlords’ attorneys have developed healthy working relationships, Neidzwski said, and it has helped connect people with the resources they need.

On Friday mornings, when eviction cases are heard, Skagit Legal Aid staff announces in English and Spanish to let tenants know about resources available to them.

One of those resources is the Skagit County Rental Eviction Assistance program, which is operated by Skagit County Public Health in partnership with Skagit Legal Aid.

The program began in 2020, but over the years, it has changed. The current version of the program started in 2023.

Since March 2023, Skagit County Public Health has assisted 315 households and distributed $2.9 million to landlords to help resolve housing crises, said Skagit County Housing Resource Coordinator Megan Starr.

“Any time that we can prevent someone from becoming unhoused and improving their housing stability is a good thing for Skagit County residents, and it's relatively a lower-cost intervention than adding more shelter beds to our system,” she said. “Normally, it's just a one-time payment that's needed to help people catch up.”

Starr said that Skagit Legal Aid and Public Health also partner to create housing stability plans with tenants who are struggling to pay rent, which has been effective.

Starr, Neidzwski and Dugan agreed that Skagit County is doing well when it comes to preventing eviction. Dugan attributed this to the right to counsel law and Skagit Legal Aid’s unique partnership with the county.

He isn’t complacent, though. Dugan said Hispanic, Latino, and Indigenous tenants and farmworkers remain underrepresented in the local court systems, and he would like to address that issue.

He said that Skagit Legal Aid has multilingual staff members who can represent tenants, but sometimes landlords can take advantage of tenants’ language barriers, leading to some tenants never having a proper legal proceeding.

Eventually, Dugan would like to see more regulations and protections for tenants, he said.

Dugan said that, until then, Skagit Legal Aid and Skagit County Public Health will continue working to assist as many tenants as they can — a job he finds fulfilling.

“I love this job. I think this is the best thing I've ever done in my career,” Dugan said. “Too often in the legal field, whoever has the most money wins."

"Really, what we're trying to do is to balance those scales to make sure that people do have an equitable shot, whether it's just getting information or providing full representation in court," he added. "That's what I really, really, really like about it and about the work that we do.”

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