

OPINIONS

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Our View

Renters beware

"... this rabble you're talking about, they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath?"

— Actor Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey in *"It's A Wonderful Life,"* 1946

In Sunday's edition, News Leader reporter Maria Longley took readers on a tour of a side of life in Staunton that some have never seen — and that some never will — low-cost rental properties in the city.

Research for the story, including exhaustive examinations of landlord-tenant complaints filed with the city and conversations with lawyers working for the Blue Ridge Legal Aid Society revealed that, despite the run-down appearance of some rental properties and the feelings of some tenants, there are no "slumlords" per se in Staunton. That doesn't mean there aren't bad landlords or less-than-desirable rental properties. Or deadbeat tenants with no pride in their surroundings or respect for the law, for that matter. They're there, of course, and probably always will be. It's simply that the law as it is written in Virginia has set down clear guidelines about the minimum responsi-

bilities of landlords to tenants — and vice versa. Most property owners (and tenants) are obeying those laws. When disputes erupt, it is generally due to ignorance by either the landlord or tenant of some of the fine points of the law. As a result, it's important that renters enter into agreements about rental properties with landlords with their eyes open and an awareness of both parties' responsibilities.

Space prevents us from re-covering all the ground covered in yesterday's article, but we would urge low-income residents seeking a rental to do one of three things: Get a copy of Sunday's paper at The News Leader office at 11 N. Central Ave. in Staunton, read the article online at www.newsleader.com, or visit the Virginia Legal Aid Web site at valegalaid.org. Know your rights, and use the law to your benefit.

Opinions expressed in this feature represent the majority opinion of the newspaper's editorial board, consisting of: Gary Stout, president and publisher; David Fritz, executive editor; Cindy Corell, city editor; Jim McCloskey, editorial cartoonist; Dennis Neal, opinion page editor; and Macon Rich, production director.