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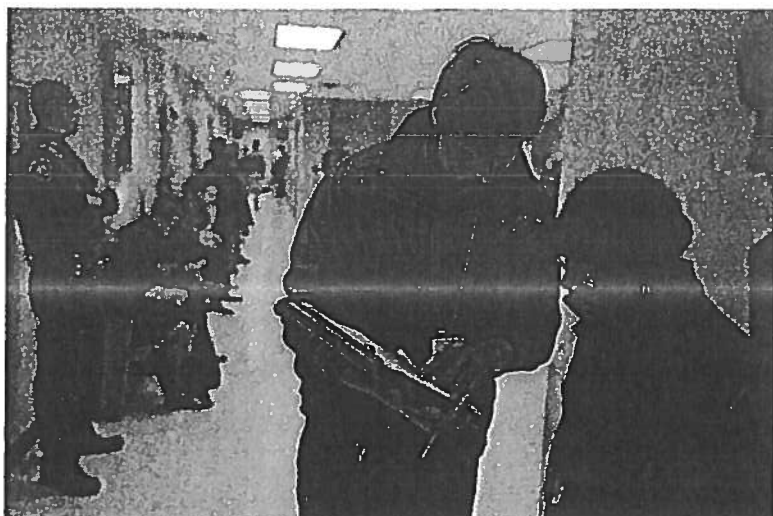
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Tenants in Maze of New York Courts Get a Helping Hand

The Court Navigator Program guides people who don't have an attorney through their civil case



Navigator Ernest Martinez was allowed to stand with Marie Emmanuel, 74 years old, in front of a Brooklyn Housing Court judge. The service helps litigants who can't afford their own lawyer. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ZOLAN KANNO-YOUNGS**

Updated Feb. 15, 2016 10:53 p.m. ET

When 74-year-old Marie Emmanuel received a summons to appear in housing court for the first time in her life, she said she felt alone, afraid and overwhelmed.

Ms. Emmanuel, a soft-spoken widow, has lived in her two-bedroom, rent-stabilized apartment in Brooklyn for more than 30 years. She said didn't have money for a lawyer, and that she dreaded the prospect of standing in front of both a judge and her landlord, who she presumed would have an attorney.

"I worried a lot about the whole process," she said. "It's my first time, so I don't know how much to say."

But when a judge addressed her on a recent morning in a Brooklyn courtroom during the latest phase of her housing dispute, a calm Ms. Emmanuel didn't need to say much. She left the talking to her court navigator, Ernest Martinez.

The Court Navigator Program, which the court system launched in February 2014, guides people who don't have an attorney through the complexities of their legal case. Unlike criminal court, civil court doesn't provide a lawyer to those who can't afford one.

The navigators, most of them college students, typically start by helping eligible litigants with their initial paperwork in the clerk's office. They help explain how the court system works and help access interpreters and social services. They also can accompany litigants in the courtroom in every borough except Staten Island.

Navigators are trained and supervised, but they aren't licensed lawyers and aren't permitted to give a legal opinion. In court, however, they can remind oft-overwhelmed tenants of facts and respond to a judge if asked a question.

Fern Fisher, the program's supervisor and deputy chief administrative judge for New York City Courts, said the navigators' most valuable service is to stand in court with a tenant who can't obtain a free lawyer from another legal service. "People before the court often become very nervous and they forget to provide valuable information," Judge Fisher said.

Last month, when a judge asked Ms. Emmanuel about her attempts to get her landlord to finish repairs in her Crown Heights apartment, and she had no response, the judge turned to her navigator.

Mr. Martinez, 27, then asked the judge if the court could send an inspector to the apartment to ensure the repairs get completed.

Mr. Martinez said he believes having a lawyer in civil court is just as important as in criminal court. "When it comes to the right of having a lawyer in a civil court

case, a housing court case, their livelihood is totally at stake too," he said.

"Things would've gone so much more faster for her if she would've had a lawyer."

Many organizations in New York City provide legal services for civil cases, including one aimed at senior citizens in need. That program denied Ms. Emmanuel's request for a lawyer, even though she fit the qualifications, Mr. Martinez said. The problem was too few lawyers, he said.

Mayor Bill de Blasio recently announced the creation of the Office of Civil Justice, which would manage \$70 million for legal-assistance programs. But even with that new effort, the available services are insufficient to meet the enormous need, Judge Fisher said.

Records show between 85% and 90% of all tenants who enter housing court don't have legal representation, Judge Fisher said.

"Even with as much funding as we can come up with, there still will be people without lawyers," she said. "[When] lawyers can't be there, the navigators fill in."



Navigator Traci Krasne, left, helps a client at Brooklyn's Housing Court. PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Traci Krasne, 24, who is applying to law school, spends her Monday and Wednesday mornings weaving through a line of frustrated tenants cramped inside the bland second-floor of housing court in Brooklyn.

Navigators look for people who are starting the process with their nonpayment case and live in rent-stabilized apartments. Out of the scores of people who waited in line, Ms. Krasne said she would likely consult with four by the end of the day.

“People are pretty frustrated and overwhelmed,” she said.

“A lot of people don’t really know what the process is. They’re coming in with difficult circumstances because a lot of people are here because they can’t pay their rent or haven’t paid their rent,” she said. “They can’t get a hold of their landlord to talk about it.”

When Nadia Membreno, 34, of Bensonhurst came to court to answer a petition from her landlord and saw the line on the second floor, she said she thought her whole day was wasted.

But after speaking to Ms. Krasne, she was able to cut into the line and received individual help filling out the paperwork. She was out of the courtroom with a referral to a legal service within 20 minutes.

“I would’ve never thought I was going to get out this easy,” she said.

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