



Washington's Association of Dispute Resolution Centers

## Supporting Housing Stability for Washington

### **Dispute Resolution Center Background**

In 1984 the state Legislature established a framework for dispute resolution centers (DRCs) to provide a high-quality resolution alternative for disputes. DRCs “meet the needs of Washington’s citizens by providing forums in which persons may voluntarily participate in the resolution of disputes” free or according to the participants’ ability to pay (RCW 7.75).

DRCs have addressed landlord and tenant disputes for 37 years and partnered with the Department of Commerce on the Foreclosure Mediation Program in response to the previous recession. In 2020, DRCs across Washington state directly served 59,309 residents. DRCs quickly adapted service delivery to virtual platforms due to the public health crisis and changing community needs.

### **Housing Stability and Dispute Resolution Experience**

DRCs engage in diverse housing stability programs. These include landlord and tenant mediation, fair housing education, conflict coaching and conciliation services. Pre-COVID, DRCs mediated an average of 900 landlord tenant cases annually statewide. Demand has grown significantly during the public health emergency. For example, in the first six weeks of the Eviction Resolution Program DRCs opened 1,032 landlord-tenant early resolution cases in just six counties.

Community Engagement and Training – DRCs adapt to meet local needs and requests. For example, DRCs facilitate public engagement processes around homeless shelter planning, provide specialized training for frontline housing staff and the public. Staff and residents alike are trained as mediators; attend de-escalation training and receive ongoing training and support from DRC as the community forms their conflict response.

Landlord Tenant and Fair Housing conciliation line -- DRCs have landlord tenant call line to address conflicts in their communities. A safe place to learn fair housing and landlord tenant rights and responsibilities. Immediate and direct referrals to legal services and fair housing agencies when resolution is not achieved. Mediation and facilitation services free to any housing related conflicts. Most calls are around repairs and clarifying notices received; access to legal services.

Foreclosure – DRCs supported the Department of Commerce Foreclosure Mediation Program since its inception in 2011. DRCs trained all foreclosure mediators and mediated 5,385 foreclosures between 2012 and 2019 with a 76% settlement rate in 2019.

Renter Certification -- One of our most effective responses to housing stability was a 14 year, award winning program in Snohomish County. DRC partnered with all shelters, transitional housing, affordable housing to help transition tenants from temporary housing into stable housing with RLTA and fair housing education, financial coaching, including referrals to bankruptcy clinics and repayment plans. Each attendee created their own rental resume and received coaching and support in building a new relationship with their landlord. DRC provided free mediation services for any conflicts arising with the tenant once housed. In 14 years, only 12 tenants required additional mediation services to move them out of tenancy (mental health and job loss) into temporary housing and connected to their case managers or other support system.

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**Resolving Disputes. Strengthening Communities.**



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DRCs and the Eviction Resolution Program (ERP) – Resolution Washington and DRCs in the six ERP pilot counties work closely with Superior Courts, legal aid, and rental assistance housing organizations. The ERP allows tenants and landlords to meet with an impartial mediator preventing homelessness and helping landlords stay in business without court involvement. ERP is directed by the Supreme Court of Washington, the Administrative Office of the Courts, Office of Civil Legal Aid and the Superior Court Judges Association. ERP is free to the participants. Resolution Washington recommends the statewide expansion of ERP to ensure equitable access to justice.

### Benefits of Early Resolution

Washington residents are experiencing fear of the unknown, shame from not being able to afford rent or mortgage payments, and anxiety over business sustainability. Early resolution preserves and improves relationships between landlords and tenants, and among stakeholders and communities. Addressing at-risk situations before tenants lose their home reduces reliance on expensive homelessness services. Early dispute resolution is trauma informed and reduces burdens on the court system.

Pre-COVID, our experience showed that 90% of the households at risk of homelessness working with the DRC avoided potential eviction. Two thirds of these cases were resolved by the DRC without need for rental assistance funds. The impact of eviction can be avoided with early resolution such as coaching, conciliation, facilitation and mediation. While economic needs during the public health crisis are greater, dispute resolution provides an effective and efficient way to prevent homelessness during the crisis and beyond.

### Further Housing Stability Potential

DRCs have the experience and skills to support state goals around housing stability and equity statewide. The primary challenge in meeting these demands insufficient operational funding. DRCs are nonprofit organizations with a public charge for service and accessibility yet minimal public funding.

### Commitment to Equity and Access to Justice

- Resolution Washington is committed to equal justice for all marginalized community members and supports people of color and low-income residents in having access to equitable opportunities statewide.
- Resolution Washington is a partner of the Washington Race Equity Justice Initiative (REJI)
- DRC certified mediators complete training in equity and addressing power imbalances between participants
- The Access to Justice Board awarded Resolution Washington the 2019 Access to Justice Community Leadership Award



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