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Franklin County set to shield some online eviction records

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Online eviction records will no longer stretch back years in Franklin County. The county Municipal Court Clerk has announced a three-year limit as a way to help people who say old records are hindering their ability to find housing.

Starting Wednesday, searches on the Franklin County Municipal Court Clerk's website won't turn up eviction records more than 3 years old.

Officials say the new policy is intended to help residents who are having difficulty obtaining housing because of previous involvement in eviction cases.

The older cases won't be viewable online but will remain on file — and open to the public — in the clerk's office.

Municipal Court Clerk Lori Tyack and others serving on a committee looking to update eviction practices say the records-display change appears to be a first for an Ohio court system.

"We just want to make sure housing is available, and maybe lessen the number of hoops that people have to jump through," Tyack said. "A lot of times, people just look to see if there are any records when they do a search. They don't necessarily open it to see how it was settled."

Also as part of the effort to address evictions, the Municipal Court is starting a new process this week that will allow the removal of a particular eviction record from online access, even if it is less than 3 years old.

"People have already been able to make this request (but) there was no formal process," said

Gene Edwards, the court's director of legal research. "Now you can fill out a standard form."

Edwards said committee members have been discussing the potential effects of eviction records on low-income families, many of whom struggle to find and maintain housing in a county with a shortage of affordable places.

Nearly 18,000 eviction cases are filed in Franklin County each year, the most in the state. City and county officials, the Columbus Women's Commission, Legal Aid Society and others have been working to implement new programs and efforts to help keep people from losing their housing.

Columbus attorney Dimitri Hatzifotinos, of the Willis Law Firm, said he doesn't oppose the records-display measures but doubts they'll have much effect.

"The filing of an eviction isn't really what landlords are looking for," said Hatzifotinos, whose firm represents large apartment complexes. "The issue is whether you still have a balance. The reality is, landlords are looking at your ability to pay."

He said there's "nothing wrong with having a process for people to take this off their (online) record. I just don't think landlords will be affected."

Others say there is definite value in shortening an eviction record's online legacy. Thousands of records, some of which aren't accurate or no longer reflect a tenant's financial situation, won't easily pop up and influence landlords or other screeners, said James Mackey, an attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Columbus.

He said he talks to families who can't get housing simply because of their eviction history.

"That record itself is the only thing standing in between," he said. "This isn't the be-all, end-all. But I do think it's going to make a big change."

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