

UT union to advocate for renters

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University of Texas students have launched the UT Tenants Union to advocate for student renters' needs and improved housing conditions in West Campus.

Isabel Webb Carey, a UT senior and the union's co-founder, said she's had "a pretty terrible time" with housing in West Campus, and she found herself being housing insecure for six months, which affected her mental, physical and academic wellness. Now she's made it her mission to educate students on housing and tenants' rights, and she helped launch the union in March.

"I realized how little transparency and information there was about housing in West Campus, and not just housing, (but also) tenants' rights," she said. "There is a huge power imbalance between the students and the leasing companies."

Webb Carey started a social media ac-

count called @UTforhousingtransparency, to educate about tenants' rights and advocating about windowless housing in the city. The group became the foundation for the union, she said.

"It kind of turned into a movement," she said. "It's not just one or two people who have isolated incidences. We all are vulnerable; we all often are or could be exploited."

Three weeks after the union's launch event, 170 people have signed union cards, Webb Carey said.

Tenant advocacy groups and unions have been formed at Georgetown University, with its launch in 2013, and at the University of Michigan, where the union is being revived by community activists after being dormant for about 20 years, according to the Michigan Daily.

Full-time students often lack the experience to navigate renting challenges, Webb Carey said, and they don't have full-time jobs that can cover hefty rental

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Windowless rooms are features in some West Campus student housing. The City Council passed a resolution calling for an amendment to require access to natural light for bedrooms in new buildings. PROVIDED BY JUAN MIRO

Union

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fees. Student renters also are transient, often staying in housing only for four years of school.

Instead of having a new wave of activism every four years, the union will allow the group to sustain and build on its advocacy, said Namratha Thrikutam, an architecture student, union co-founder and intern at Texas Housers, a nonprofit that supports low-income Texans.

“We’ve all been waiting for this,” Thrikutam said. “We’ve all been waiting for a space to open up where we can advocate for ourselves.”

Since it is a tenants union, the group will not seek certification from the National Labor Review Board as a labor union would, said Kayla Quilantang, a union co-founder. Now that it has obtained its member base, the union is looking for legal representation and determining its next initiatives.

Any renter who lives in the West Campus neighborhood is welcome to join, including online students and those at other Austin-area universities, said Grant Gilker, a UT junior and union co-founder.

With whom will the UT Tenants Union partner?

The group hopes to advocate for policy changes at city and university levels.

To start, its goals include addressing property-level concerns, establishing legal aid resources that students can turn to when they face problems and advocating for the university to create an emergency rental fund for students who are forced to seek temporary accommodations, students said.

The university did not respond to Statesman requests for comment.

Quilantang, a fourth-year UT student in the architecture program, helped write a letter in August to the Austin City Council to advocate against windowless bedrooms – a feature of some West Campus student housing options. The letter, sent Sept. 1, had more than 800 signatures in support, Quilantang said.

The students’ advocacy resulted in the City Council passing a resolution in September calling for the elected city leaders to initiate an amendment to require access to natural light for bedrooms in new buildings.

“It represents a strategy of cross-disciplinary collaboration at both the university and citywide level,” Quilantang said. “We really want to use connections that we made from that single initiative.”

The council could act as soon as this month, said Zo Qadri, a council member who worked with students to address windowless housing and on the University Neighborhood Overlay, the planning district for West Campus.

“I’m incredibly grateful for the partnership we’ve formed with the UT Tenants Union,” Qadri said. “We look forward to continuing to give students a voice and working toward solutions together.”

Mayor Kirk Watson said he looks forward to the students’ policy ideas, saying students have helped advocate for housing issues on which the City Council has acted, such as occupancy limits.

“Austin is Austin in part because we’ve always had a fountain of youth that’s been fed by the smart and interesting and innovative students that flock to UT and our other great colleges and universities,” Watson said. “Student voices are essential to our community conversation around housing and affordability, and I’m happy they’re organizing through the UT Tenants Union to amplify those voices.”

What’s the UT Tenants Union’s long-term goal for West Campus?

The UT Tenants Union hopes to create a 10-year plan to help pass effective policy changes at the university, system and city levels to protect renters in West Campus, said Gilker, who also serves on the board of College Houses Texas, an affordable housing student community.

“I want to live in a better neighborhood, I want to live better with my neighbors, and I want them to have happier lives, too,” Gilker said. “Ultimately, there’s very little advocacy happening, and very little pride taken in where we live, and there’s so much pride taken in what we do. That crossover can happen, and I’m excited to see it.”

The group hopes the union encourages students and opens an avenue for them to get involved in conversations about the neighborhood.

“We want this UT Tenants Union to be an example of how much power student voices hold to shape their neighborhood the way they see is best,” Quilantang said. “We have the right to be an active part of this conversation.”