



Office of the Attorney General

Washington, D. C. 20530

April 23, 2020

MEMORANDUM FOR THE ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND
ALL UNITED STATES ATTORNEYS

FROM:

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W.P. Barr", is written over the printed name of the Attorney General.

SUBJECT:

Stopping Predatory Practices Related to COVID-19 and Housing

The current national crisis related to COVID-19 has brought out the best in most, but the worst in some. In prior Memoranda, I directed our prosecutors to prioritize cases against those seeking to illicitly profit from the pandemic, either by hoarding scarce medical resources to sell them for extortionate prices, or by defrauding people who are already in dire circumstances due to the severe economic and societal problems the pandemic has caused. I am now directing you to deploy all available enforcement tools against anyone who tries to capitalize on the current crisis by sexually harassing people in need of housing.

As the country adopts drastic measures to slow the spread of COVID-19, many Americans have lost their jobs and many more have seen their wages curtailed. These losses have forced many to seek abatements or suspensions of their rent, with reports that nearly one third of Americans were unable to pay their April rent at the beginning of the month. Many landlords have responded to these circumstances with understanding and care, trying to work with their tenants to weather the current crisis. They should be commended for those efforts.

There have been reports, however, of other landlords who have responded to requests to defer rent payments with demands for sexual favors and other acts of unwelcome sexual conduct. Such behavior is despicable and it is illegal. And the Department of Justice has not hesitated to intervene when clear misconduct occurs. This behavior is not tolerated in normal times, and certainly will not be tolerated now.

I am therefore directing the Civil Rights Division and every U.S. Attorney's Office to devote all necessary resources to investigate reports of housing-related sexual harassment resulting from the current crisis. On October 3, 2017, the Civil Rights Division launched the Sexual Harassment in Housing Initiative to combat sexual harassment in housing, and has since opened a record number of sexual-harassment investigations and filed a record number of cases. Recently, for example, the Department of Justice obtained \$400,000 in monetary damages on behalf of a landlord's former tenants and potential tenants who were subjected to unwanted sexual intercourse, other unwanted sexual contact, unwanted sexual advances, and offers to reduce or eliminate security deposits and rent in exchange for sexual contact. The men and women leading that initiative are thus well equipped to work with Assistant U.S. Attorneys across the country in investigating and bringing to justice any landlord or other person who has control over housing and engages in this sort of misconduct.

I am further directing the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, Eric Dreiband, and Christina Nolan, the U.S. Attorney for the District of Vermont, to oversee and coordinate these efforts. They should work not only with all Department of Justice offices and other federal agencies, but with state and local officials as well. Many reports of housing-related sexual harassment will be made locally and it is imperative that state and local officials understand that the Justice Department stands ready to take aggressive action against this misconduct whenever it occurs.

The current times are difficult enough without predatory practices by unscrupulous landlords. We must stop such behavior in its tracks. I thank you for your attention to this important initiative and for your service to our country.