

## *WATCH – Brandeis Housing Clinic supports tenants in Waltham*

**By Jack Jacoby**

WATCH CDC

Every Monday and Thursday evening, Waltham tenants come to the WATCH Housing Clinic for support. Facing eviction, desperate to find housing with affordable rent, needing help with utility bills, tenants come to the Housing Clinic for advice, referrals and assurance.

A single mom came recently who got behind on her rent and was facing eviction. She learned about the eviction process and what her rights were and also made an appointment with Metro Housing Boston to apply for emergency funding for families facing homelessness. Another family came in because they were low on funds and wanted to know where they could get food. They got a list of food pantries and hot meal sites in Waltham. A senior citizen wanted know how he could get help with his fuel bill and was able to apply for fuel assistance. This is the work that happens each week at the Housing Clinic.

The Housing Clinic is a collaboration between WATCH CDC and Brandeis University. Eleven years ago, Brandeis Professor Laura Goldin, a

long-term environmental lawyer, sought to balance her academic role with direct community involvement. Founding of a Housing Clinic at WATCH offered an opportunity to build a program that matched trained student advocates with needs in the community.

Goldin builds participation in the new Housing Clinic into the framework of her environmental studies and justice classes. Students are trained in the resources available to help tenants in crisis situations, and to work with clients to access those resources.

The clinic addresses the challenges faced by Waltham's low-income tenants. The list of services provided by the clinic is extensive: locating emergency shelter, addressing unsafe living conditions, making referrals to resources for emergency financial assistance and securing legal assistance. The Housing Clinic is free, and Spanish translation is available.

Student involvement in the clinic is essential, and one of its most notable and remarkable features. Goldin speaks highly of Brandeis students and their passion for learning and involvement in the community. In preparing them for

the clinic she reminds them, "Everybody who walks in this door is a person with an important story. It's a privilege that they share their stories with you. You have an opportunity to work with them to help."

The clinic offers opportunities for students to engage thoughtfully in the broader community and to see their work make a real impact on people's lives. At the same time, WATCH and Goldin set a tone ensuring that the experience is not one of charity work. Instead, the experience is one of people treating each other with mutual respect, each learning from the other.

Tyler Belanga, a former student volunteer and clinic supervisor, is one of many students profoundly impacted by the clinic. "WATCH allows students to affect real change in a struggling community, rather than simply talk about it in an academic bubble. For me, it sparked a desire to make a career out of helping others and pushed me to become a more action-oriented problem solver."

As the needs of low-income tenants continues to grow and more tenants seek assistance,

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to support Waltham tenants," said WATCH Executive Director Daria Gere.

With support from donors, WATCH hired a part time coordinator in 2017, Suzi Solomon. The growing clinic received a substantial boost when WATCH received state funding to increase the position to full time last year. Now, with staff support, not only do clients receive free assistance on the nights that the clinic runs, but they can also make appointments to meet one-on-one with Suzi during business hours. WATCH also is able to offer some clients in person support during eviction court hearings and mediation and has been able to follow up with clients after their visit to the clinic to make sure they have received the support they need.

Once in the door, clients are directed to a wide range of services, including some of WATCH's own programming. According to Solomon, the clinic also guides clients in applying for food stamps (SNAP), fuel assistance and free furniture. It also makes referrals for immigration assistance, job support,



Brandeis students interning at WATCH. [COURTESY PHOTO]

ESL classes and health care. The clinic is in many cases just the first step.

Since forming, the Housing Clinic has had 2,750 client visits. This year alone the Housing Clinic had a record 340 visits, assisting 250 clients.

WATCH also started a new partnership last year with the Waltham public schools to identify families with school age children that are at risk of homelessness. WATCH provides case management to stabilize the families' housing or help them find new housing or emergency state housing.

With full-time staff attention and more than 10 years partnering with compassionate and engaged Brandeis University students, the clinic is primed

for success. The Housing Clinic evolved and grew from a very simple premise. Goldin explains, "I was always solving problems.. This just kind of went along with that: we've got a problem, what are we going to do about it?"

Gere shares, "Laura Goldin's legacy in the Waltham community is felt by all the tenants who leave the Housing Clinic feeling more empowered and with tools and resources to improve their lives. We are very grateful to her for her vision and many years of dedicated service to the community."

*For more information about the Housing Clinic, please visit WATCH at [watchcdc.org](http://watchcdc.org) or call Suzi Solomon at 781-891-6689, ext. 203.*