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Paying Cheyenne's bills

When the law isn't just, just change the law. London's city council has applied this reasoning to the complex situation at two London apartment buildings on Cheyenne Avenue owned by Elijah Elieff. The tenants are caught between a rock and a hard place: Because the landlord owes at least \$13,000 in unpaid utility bills, their electricity and water supply is threatened. But their efforts to re-direct rent money into a fund to pay off that bill has led to Elieff filing **eviction notices** for non-payment of rent.

The tenants' association has asked that the city get into the act by becoming the agent which collects the rent and directs it toward paying off the utility bills. Under existing law, the city can't do that.

This week, councillors asked the city's legal staff to investigate how London can get a provincial law in place, similar to one in existence for the city of Toronto, that allows this kind of collection action in desperate situations such as the one at Cheyenne. Unfortunately, this will be a long process. The legislature isn't sitting now at Queen's Park and it's doubtful even a speedy push of such a bill by local NDP MPPs sympathetic to the Cheyenne tenants' cause will get a law in place this winter.

But at least this commitment is a start on the city's part. With the possibility of London being willing and able to collect Cheyenne rent, the utilities commission may be more willing to keep supplying the buildings with water and electricity despite the outstanding bills. If the city is able to collect rent to pay off such bills, under the law effective for Toronto, a landlord loses the right to evict tenants because the rent is being paid — not just to the landlord.

The Cheyenne situation gets messier every day and it's disheartening to see money being spent on legal battles that could be used directly to improve the lives of the apartments' tenants. But London needs the ability to step into these landlord-tenant disputes when all else fails. Let's hope the provincial legislation is put in place as soon as possible without getting scuttled by cumbersome political process.

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