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# Impact Report

2016-2017

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## Letter from the Executive Director



**Noelle Francois**

“I would’ve paid good money for a third party to document my lack of heat!” Sandra told us this past winter at her home in Harlem. She reached out to Heat Seek to request a sensor, something many New Yorkers do throughout the year, and luckily we were able to help. We don’t actively solicit individual tenants like Sandra who don’t come through a lawyer or community organizer, because limited funding means we usually struggle just to keep up with requests from our partners. But, when we found ourselves with a few extra sensors toward the end of winter, we realized we could give Sandra exactly what she needed to convince her landlord to repair her broken radiator.

Thankfully, Sandra is just one of many success stories from this past winter.

In the past year, we’ve honed our partnership work with community groups, while also experimenting with new strategies to reach cold New Yorkers and to change the way our city enforces bad acting landlords. We partnered with elected officials like Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams to hold press conferences and introduce city council legislation; we worked with dedicated volunteers to build a prototype data tool to help organizers and lawyers identify at-risk buildings; and we trained

Housing Court judges to better understand our data. By the end of the season, we had installed sensors with ten core partners throughout 26 buildings, serving 54 families across all five boroughs.

We’ve also continued to build Heat Seek’s future as an organization. We ran our first formal fundraising campaign this spring, raising over \$10,000 from individual donors like you. With a grant from Google, we redesigned our sensor for the first time since our founding. And with help from our advisory board, we’re exploring sustainable funding, to ensure our work and our mission continue well into the future.

Noelle Francois  
Executive Director

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**“I reached out to Heat Seek in the midst of my misery.”**

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**“They were trying to intimidate us, so we fought back.”**

LORAINE, BROOKLYN





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## Keeping the Heat On in New York City



Under New York City’s Housing Code, landlords are obliged to maintain apartments heated above certain temperatures from October through May. Last winter, the city received almost 200,000 heat- and hot-water-related complaints from around 37,000 unique buildings, concentrated in lower-income neighborhoods in Upper Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and parts of Queens and Staten Island. And, yet: less than 4% of those complaints resulted in a violation. Thousands of New Yorkers are freezing in their homes, with few resources to get the heat turned up.

Heat Seek works at the intersection of innovative technology and tenant advocacy to provide new tools in the fight to maintain affordable housing in New York City. Begun in the winter of 2014 through a collaboration between tech entrepreneurs and social justice advocates, Heat Seek works to support New York City tenants struggling to receive adequate heat in their apartments. Through

partnerships with lawyers, organizers, and city officials, we provide web-connected temperature sensors to tenants whose landlords fail to provide heat, often as part of a wider harassment campaign aimed at driving out lower income tenants from apartments in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods.

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**“The role that Heat Seek NYC plays in the lives of Brooklyn’s tenants is invaluable.”**

ERIC L. ADAMS,  
BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT



## Winter 2016-2017: Deepening our Impact

Heat Seek began last winter with one goal: to target bad actor landlords in at-risk neighborhoods by installing multiple sensors in their buildings and across their portfolios. Unlike the previous winter, where we often installed only one sensor in a building and had upwards of 20 partners, we wanted to focus on particular neighborhoods and partner more closely with fewer organizations. We knew from 2016 that we could deploy sensors far and wide; but with limited resources in the context of gigantic need, we wanted to maximize our limited technology and provide data-driven insights about what's happening in our city.

To that end, we sought to:

- Partner more closely with fewer organizations
- Work in the most at-risk neighborhoods
- Target bad-actor landlords: those who withhold heat as a tactic to drive out rent-regulated tenants
- Deploy multiple sensors in each building

Midway through a mild winter, we found ourselves with a few extra sensors, so we began to reach out to tenants on our waitlist: motivated New Yorkers who found our website and signed up for a sensor outside a relationship with a lawyer or organizer. After installing sensors for a handful of tenants



**56**  
families



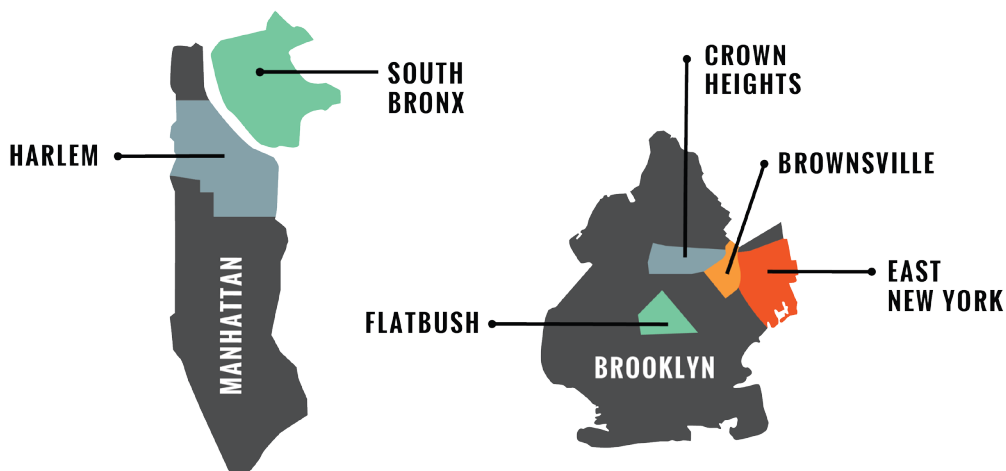
**96%**  
bad landlords

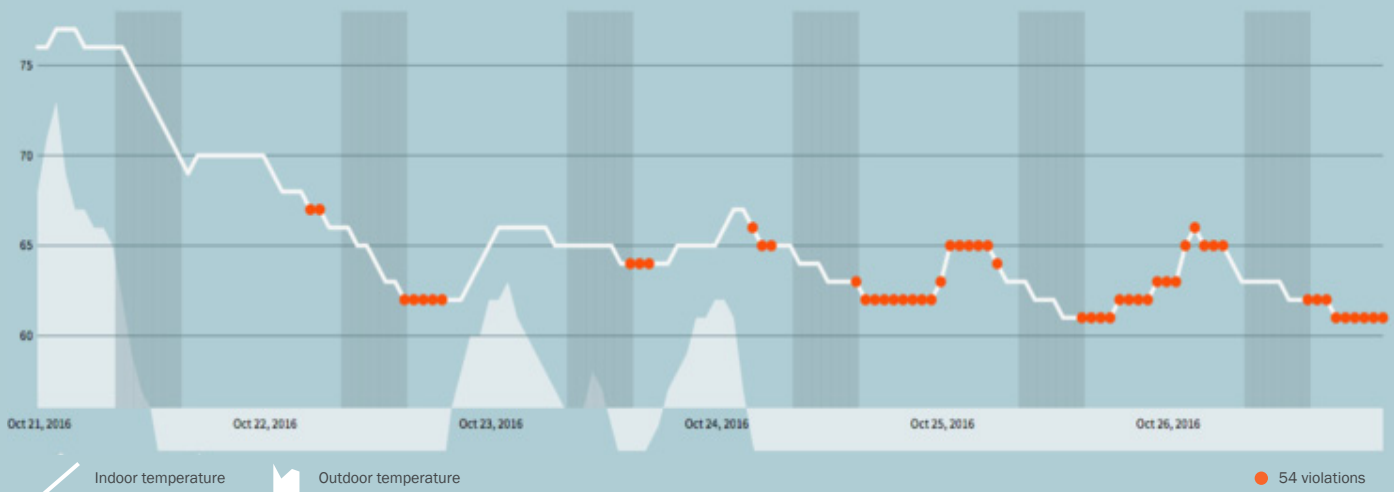


**\$300,000+**  
in settlements



**5**  
boroughs





### Analyze and identify violations in real time

Our web application analyzes sensor data, alongside the outdoor temperature, in order to record each hour the temperature falls below the legal limit as defined by the NYC Housing Code. Data is displayed in a graph as well as a comprehensive heat log, so that tenants and their advocates have robust data to take to court and to use in landlord-tenant negotiations.

with bad landlords in at-risk neighborhoods, we worked with each tenant to send a certified letter to their landlord, register formal complaints with the city, and connect with further legal/organizing support where appropriate. By using our data and support, some of these tenants were able to get their heat restored and avoid housing court altogether! While our sample size was limited, with such positive results it's likely we'll expand this work in the future.

So, how'd we do against our program goals for the 2016-17 winter? In total, Heat Seek served 54 families in 26 buildings across five boroughs. We worked closely with 10 core community partners and legal service providers to provide engagement and support throughout the season.

#### Targeting:

- 76% of Heat Seek buildings located in neighborhoods slated for re-zoning, the most at-risk in the city
- 96% of buildings owned by a known bad actor landlord
- 77% of buildings had temperatures consistently below the legal limit

#### Results:

- Housing court - helped tenants win more than \$300,000 in settlements
- Repairs - used Heat Seek data to force landlords to make repairs
- Inspections - HPD inspectors made surprise visits to buildings based on Heat Seek data
- Monitoring - three landlords chose to turn up the heat after hearing about our sensors
- Negative PR - a press conference with the Brooklyn Borough President forced a bad landlord to turn up the heat



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## Results: What Public Pressure Can Do

### December 1, 2016 Press Conference

The temperature data coming from 178 Rockaway Parkway in Brownsville, Brooklyn painted a clear picture of a landlord manipulating the heat.

Heat Seek installed temperature sensors in the building in October in partnership with The Legal Aid Society, and in the weeks that followed, they recorded hundreds of hours in which the temperature was below the legal limit according to NYC Housing Code. Despite a long, warm fall, nearly 25% of the hours were in violation.

On December 1st, Heat Seek held a press conference in front of the building to announce a

partnership with Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams and The Legal Aid Society. The same day, Legal Aid Society attorneys filed a case against the landlord in NYC Housing Court.

And then a funny thing happened...

The heat came on! After weeks in which the temperature hovered at or around 60 degrees, the temperature increased almost a full 10 degrees just one day after the press conference. And it stayed up, remaining comfortably in the 70s for much of the winter.





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## Results: Empowering Tenants to Confront their Landlords

“I called to report the problem, and they wouldn’t do anything about it. I know it’s a building-wide issue that many of my neighbors struggle with,” but Sandra refused to let up. So, “I reached out to Heat Seek in the midst of my misery”.

Because we had some extra hardware in February, we were able to install sensors for several tenants from our waitlist who lived in buildings that fit our criteria: bad landlords in at-risk neighborhoods who are trying to drive out rent-regulated tenants. “There’s a concerted effort to get lifelong Harlem residents out of the building, raise the rents, and bring in people of higher incomes,” Sandra reported to Heat Seek.

After a few weeks with a Heat Seek sensor, we confirmed that her temperatures were consistently below the legal limit, and Sandra wanted to take action. She knew that the city inspection system wouldn’t fix her problem quick enough, so she hand-delivered a demand letter to the landlord, which Heat Seek drafted and provided to her along with her heat log.

Her landlord was taken aback—by both Sandra’s

persistence and Heat Seek’s sensor—so the chiefs of management and maintenance met with her. “This can’t be right,” they complained, upon first examining her heat log. “I know it’s right,” Sandra replied, confident in her data. Convinced by Heat Seek’s third-party testimony, the management agreed to send another maintenance person again.

“This time, they took the radiator apart, diagnosed the problem, and fixed the broken part. They spent two hours there, unlike their previous visits, and my heat was immediately better!” Sandra tells Heat Seek. “It was nerve-wracking approaching my landlord: I have a lease that ends and don’t know if they want me out. I would not have done it without Heat Seek, a third party without a dog in the fight who just monitors and reports what they see.”

We hear stories like this from many of our tenants: our objective heat logs provide them much-needed tools in their struggle for sufficient heat. Our work can prevent them from the miserable process of Housing Court, by proving both the tenant’s will and the severity of their cold temperatures. Sometimes, Heat Seek is enough to convince landlords to do the right thing and turn up the heat.

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## Thank you!

Heat Seek wishes to thank our Board of Directors as well as the following sponsors for making 2017 a great year!

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**The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**

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## Our Leadership Team



### Noelle Francois, Executive Director

Noelle comes to Heat Seek from a background in social justice, with a focus on housing policy and community development. She holds a Master of Public Administration from New York University and a bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary.

### Anthony Damelio, Director of Programs

Anthony brings years of experience in non-profits focused on poverty and housing issues. He holds a bachelor's degree from Fordham University and a master's from Yale University and comes more recently from work on issues of homelessness in Morningside Heights and Atlanta, GA.

### Sol Astudillo, Field Agent

A lifelong Bronx resident, Sol brings her love of community, her skills with tenants of all kinds, and her commitment to Heat Seek's mission, as she maintains Heat Seek's primary tenant relationships throughout five boroughs.





**HEAT SEEK**

NYC



[heatseek.org](http://heatseek.org)