title: “Changing Locks After an Eviction in Chicago: A Landlord’s Legal Guide”

meta: “When can a Chicago landlord change the locks after an eviction? Learn Illinois law, the sheriff eviction process, and how to rekey units safely and legally.”

target_keyword: “eviction locksmith Chicago”

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Changing Locks After an Eviction in Chicago: A Landlord’s Legal Guide

If you own or manage rental property in Chicago, the single most common way a routine tenant turnover turns into a lawsuit is a lock change done at the wrong time. Illinois has some of the strongest anti self-help eviction protections in the country, and changing a tenant’s locks before the process is legally complete can expose you to penalties that dwarf the cost of a locksmith.

This guide is written for Chicago landlords, property managers, and building owners who need to know exactly when an **eviction locksmith Chicago** service can legally rekey or replace locks, what the sheriff-enforced process looks like, and how to secure the unit the moment possession is legally yours. We handle post-eviction lock changes across Chicago every week, so the guidance below reflects how the process actually plays out on the ground, not just the statute.

> **This article is for:** Chicago-area landlords, condo owners renting units, and property managers handling tenant removals. It is general information, not legal advice. Confirm your specific situation with an attorney.

Key Takeaways

- In Illinois, you cannot legally change a tenant’s locks, remove their belongings, or shut off utilities to force them out. This is called “self-help” eviction and it is illegal.
- Lockouts must go through the courts and be enforced by the **Cook County Sheriff**. Only after the sheriff completes the eviction do you regain legal possession.
- The Chicago Residential Landlord and Tenant Ordinance (RLTO) adds penalties on top of state law, including damages of up to two months’ rent plus attorney’s fees for an illegal lockout.
- The safest moment to change or rekey the locks is immediately after the sheriff’s eviction is executed and the unit is returned to your possession.
- Rekeying is faster and cheaper than full replacement for most units, but abandoned-property and security concerns sometimes call for new hardware.

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Why You Cannot Just Change the Locks

Illinois law makes “self-help” eviction illegal. Under the Illinois Forcible Entry and Detainer Act, a landlord may not use force, change the locks, remove doors, shut off heat, water, or electricity, or otherwise make a rental unit unusable to push a tenant out. Only a sheriff acting on a court order can remove a tenant.

Within the City of Chicago, the RLTO raises the stakes further. Section 5-12-160 prohibits any unlawful interference with a tenant’s occupancy, and a tenant who is illegally locked out can recover possession, collect **two months’ rent or twice the actual damages** (whichever is greater), and have their attorney’s fees paid by the landlord. A single premature lock change can therefore cost thousands of dollars even when your underlying eviction case is completely valid.

The rule is simple: the tenant’s right to occupy the unit ends only when a court says it does and the sheriff enforces it. Until then, the locks stay as they are.

The Legal Eviction Process in Cook County

Every legal lock change after a tenant removal in Chicago follows the same court-driven sequence. Knowing the timeline helps you schedule your locksmith for the right day.

1. **Serve proper notice.** Depending on the reason, this is a 5-day notice (unpaid rent), a 10-day notice (lease violation), or a 30-day notice (month-to-month termination). Chicago’s Fair Notice Ordinance requires longer notice for longer tenancies.
2. **File an eviction case.** If the tenant does not comply, you file a Forcible Entry and Detainer action in the Cook County Circuit Court.
3. **Attend the court hearing.** A judge reviews the case and, if you prevail, issues an **order of possession**.
4. **Wait out the enforcement stay.** The order typically includes a period (often around 7 to 14 days) before it can be enforced.
5. **Schedule the sheriff.** You place the order with the Cook County Sheriff’s Office, which schedules and carries out the physical eviction.
6. **Take possession.** Once the sheriff completes the eviction, legal possession returns to you.

Only after step 6 is the unit yours to secure. Any lock change before the sheriff acts is the illegal self-help the RLTO punishes.

> **Pro Tip:** Line up your locksmith in advance and confirm the sheriff's eviction window. We keep same-day appointment slots open specifically so Chicago landlords can rekey a unit within hours of the sheriff completing the eviction, closing the security gap before a former tenant can return with a copied key.

When You Can Legally Change the Locks

There are a few distinct scenarios, and the right answer depends on how possession was returned to you.

After a Sheriff-Enforced Eviction

This is the clean case. The sheriff has removed the tenant, possession is legally yours, and you should change or rekey every exterior lock and any keyed common-area access the tenant held. Do it the same day. A former tenant may still have working keys, and rekeying is the only way to guarantee those keys no longer function.

After a Voluntary Move-Out or Surrender

If the tenant hands back the keys and vacates, or signs an agreement surrendering possession, you can change the locks once they are genuinely gone. Get the surrender in writing and confirm the unit is empty before you touch the hardware.

After Confirmed Abandonment

Abandonment is legally tricky. Unpaid rent plus an apparently empty unit is not automatic proof. Document your evidence carefully, and when in doubt, proceed through the court process rather than assuming abandonment. Our lock change service in Chicago and rekeying teams routinely coordinate around these timelines so the hardware work happens only once you are on solid legal ground.

For the actual removal step, an experienced eviction locksmith in Chicago can open a unit non-destructively when a tenant has left a lock jammed or changed the hardware themselves, which happens more often than most owners expect.

Rekey or Replace After an Eviction?

Once possession is yours, you have two paths. Choosing well saves money without sacrificing security.

Factor	Rekey	Replace
Typical cost	Lower (reuses existing hardware)	Higher (new lock bodies)
Time on site	Faster, often under an hour per unit	Longer, depends on door prep

Factor	Rekey	Replace
When to choose	Hardware is in good shape, you only need new keys	Locks are damaged, worn, or low grade
Security outcome	Old keys stop working immediately	Old keys stop working plus upgraded hardware
Best for	Standard turnover between tenants	Post-break-in units or security upgrades

For most evictions, **rekeying** is the smart default. It disables every key the former tenant held, costs less, and takes minutes per cylinder. Choose full replacement when the locks are damaged (sometimes a departing tenant deliberately breaks them), when the existing hardware is a low grade you have wanted to upgrade anyway, or when you are moving the unit to a higher security standard. If you are upgrading, our high-security lock installation options give you pick-resistant and bump-resistant cylinders.

Securing a Multi-Unit Building

Evictions in Chicago apartment buildings raise a second issue: the former tenant may hold keys to shared entrances, mailrooms, laundry areas, and their unit. Rekeying only the apartment door leaves the building exposed.

For buildings, a **master key system** lets you rekey an individual unit while keeping a single management key working across the property, so you are not carrying dozens of keys or rekeying common doors every turnover. Our master key system services in Chicago and ongoing building management locksmith service are built for exactly this. Property managers handling frequent turnover often keep us on call so each eviction is followed by a same-day rekey that protects both the vacated unit and the wider building.

Every technician we send is background-checked and works for a licensed, bonded, and insured company, which matters when you are handing over access to an entire building.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can a landlord change the locks on a tenant in Chicago?

Not while the tenant still has legal possession. Changing the locks to force a tenant out is an illegal self-help eviction under Illinois law and the Chicago RLTO, and it can cost you two months' rent plus attorney's fees. You may only change the locks after a sheriff-enforced eviction, a written surrender, or confirmed abandonment.

How long does the eviction process take in Cook County?

It varies, but from serving notice to a completed sheriff eviction commonly runs several weeks to a few months, depending on court backlog and the enforcement stay on the order of possession. Plan your lock change for the day the sheriff completes the eviction.

Should I rekey or replace the locks after an eviction?

Rekey for standard turnovers where the hardware is sound. It is cheaper, faster, and instantly disables the former tenant's keys. Replace when locks are damaged, worn, low grade, or when you want a security upgrade.

What if the evicted tenant changed the locks themselves?

That is common. A professional eviction locksmith can open the unit non-destructively and install hardware keyed to you, so you are not forced to break the door. Once you have legal possession, you control the locks regardless of what the tenant installed.

Do I need to rekey common building doors too?

If the former tenant had keys to shared entrances or amenity areas, yes. A master key system lets you rekey the individual unit while keeping building-wide management access intact.

Conclusion

Timing is everything with an eviction lock change in Chicago. Change the locks too early and you risk RLTO penalties that turn a valid eviction into an expensive loss. Wait until the Cook County Sheriff completes the eviction, then rekey or replace the same day to close the security gap before a former tenant can return.

The Professional Locksmith has served Chicago landlords and property managers since 2012 with fast, legally-timed eviction lock changes, rekeying, and master key work. When your sheriff eviction is scheduled, call us at **(312) 796-0901** and we will have a background-checked technician ready to secure the unit the moment possession is yours.