



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB86

Tenant Protection Act of 2021

Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart

January 18, 2022 • Environment and Transportation Committee

What the Bill Does

HB86 will offer protections to tenants living with abusive landlords and in unsafe conditions. First, the bill extends existing lease termination protections for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence to victims of stalking. Second, the bill gives certain qualified professionals the authority to verify if a tenant is a victim of abuse. Third, the bill mandates transparency from landlords using a Ratio Utility Billing System, requiring them to notify tenants in writing as to what they're being charged for. Fourth, the bill compels landlords withholding any part of the security deposit to provide tenants supporting documentation. And finally, the bill grants tenants the ability to use community spaces within their buildings for the purpose of organizing tenants' associations.

Why the Bill Is Important

Housing is an integral part of the safety and security of all Marylanders. A home can take many different forms — about a third of Marylanders now live in rental properties — but it should nevertheless offer its residents comfort and protection from the outside world. For poor tenants, reasonably priced housing may be all that keeps them safe during the pandemic and beyond. Already struggling to stay afloat through hard times, they can't afford unreasonable and unexplained utility charges or arbitrary deductions from their security deposit; while some may not bat an eyelash at a few extra dollars here and there, that difference could determine a poor tenant's ability to pay their bills — or even feed themselves.

While leases are important for defining terms of housing for both a landlord and a tenant, they can dangerously trap the tenant in unanticipated situations. If a tenant's health and safety is at risk, whether it be through domestic violence, sexual assault, or another form of abuse, it's imperative that

they be able to leave that property as soon as possible — avoiding disastrous consequences in the process — after the recommendation of a trusted professional. Furthermore, if tenants' living conditions aren't safe, it's only right that they can come together to collectively make an appeal to their landlord.

Why the Committee Should Vote Favorably

Most landlords treat their tenants fairly and with respect, but some see their power imbalance as an opportunity to exploit their vulnerable residents. This bill only burdens landlords with the most basic requirement — to tell their tenants why they're being charged. And if the landlord is already acting reasonably, this information should be easy to come by. Beyond simple notification, this bill allows a threatened tenant to be safely evaluated and released from their lease and gives tenants the ability to meet with their fellow residents in a community space.

None of the provisions in the bill are radical; in fact, every provision is modeled after laws in many other states. **In 2019, Maryland was ranked the 20th most hostile state toward tenants—even states like Kentucky, Tennessee, and Oklahoma have stronger tenant protections than we do.** The five major changes proposed in this bill would offer common sense safeguards to make this state safer for the high number of renters living in it.

No Marylander should be trapped in an unsafe or exploitative home just because they're poor. I urge a favorable report.