



**SB0504 - Landlord and Tenant - Residential Leases and Holdover Tenancies -
Local Just Cause Termination Provisions**

**Hearing before the House Environment and Transportation Committee,
Mar. 7, 2023 at 1:00PM**

Position: SUPPORT (FAV)

Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility (CPSR) is statewide evidenced-based, organization of over 900 physicians, other health professionals and supporters, that addresses the existential public health threats: nuclear weapons, the climate crisis and the issues of pollution and toxics' effect on health as seen through the intersectional lens of environmental, social and racial justice. As an organization founded by physicians, we understand that prevention is far superior to treatment in reducing costs; death, illness, injury, and suffering.

SB 504 is enabling legislation that would give power to Maryland counties to establish "just cause" or "good cause" limitations on lease non-renewals, expressly granting authority to counties to establish basic parameters within which rental agreements may be non-renewed. That means local policymakers would be able to determine the kind of "just cause" policy that best serves their jurisdiction, whether by type of building, for certain populations, or under certain circumstances such as a state of emergency. Without SB 504, local efforts are stymied by legal concerns around preemption. We urge the Committee to move SB 504 favorably so that local government can act with clear authority on this issue.

What is "just cause" policy?

When it comes to lease non-renewals, Maryland is currently a "no cause" state. That means a landlord can decide to non-renew without any stated cause. That means that working people and their children face the threat of displacement, even when they follow all the rules. Without any requirement for explanation from landlords, the possibility is open for landlord non-renewal decisions to be made in a spirit of retribution, possibly towards tenants who have drawn attention to declining conditions or increasing rents. Tenants therefore end up under pressure to quietly accept poor conditions just to stay in their communities, conditions which

might include unsafe and unhealthy buildings and rent increase rates that jump past a reasonable market index.

SB 504 enables Maryland counties to move away from these current no-cause policies by passing local "just cause" laws that limit lease non-renewals. "Just cause" means that a landlord must have an acceptable reason for choosing not to renew an expiring lease. While the bill does the work of defining "just cause" and includes a helpful list of potentially qualifying non-renewal reasons -- substantial lease violations, illegal activities, removal of the property from the market, or personal use of the property by the owner -- counties are granted discretion on how to contour their policy, if they enact one.

Where is the interest in "just cause eviction"?

Since 2008, just cause eviction legislation has been introduced 8 times within the state – including multiple statewide bills, as well as bills specifically pertaining to Prince George’s County and Montgomery County. During the COVID-19 state of emergency, Howard County unsuccessfully attempted to prohibit lease non-renewals while Baltimore City passed a short-term provision to require just cause for lease non-renewals until 6 months after the state of emergency’s end. These efforts demonstrate a sustained desire in Maryland localities for just cause policies.

Washington, D.C. (since 1985) and Philadelphia (since 2018) have adopted just cause eviction policies. The state of New Jersey, has had “just cause” laws in place since 1974 and is a testament to how these policies can benefit both tenants and new development. While opponents often speculate that any measures to help tenants stay in their homes hinders the development of new housing stock, New Jersey’s model makes clear that just cause laws don’t have this effect. [“Something in the Garden State is clearly working. According to data from the Eviction Lab, New Jersey cities such as Trenton, Paterson, Jersey City, and West New York have among the lowest eviction rates in the country. Meanwhile, construction is absolutely exploding.”](#)

Additionally, looking at 4 localities in California, a [2019 Princeton/Eviction Lab](#) study finds that "just cause eviction ordinances have a significant and noticeable effect on eviction and eviction filing rates. Given the budget limitations of many states and municipalities to fund other solutions to the eviction crisis, passage of just cause eviction ordinances appears to be a relatively low-cost, effective policy solution."

SB 504 recognizes that local legislatures want to aid their renters in achieving stable housing so that they are able to contribute long-term to the workforce and the local economy. Requiring just cause as a precondition for an eviction can be a tailored policy that boosts the stability of the housing market by protecting families, neighborhoods, and communities. SB 504 ensures local legislatures can pass enforceable laws whereby no one is arbitrarily deprived of their housing.

Chesapeake PSR strongly encourages passage of SB 504 to protect the mental and physical health and safety of Marylanders who all have a right to safe and healthy living conditions. Inadequate housing is associated with chronic asthma, and is dangerous for children's development especially for those under 5. Young children exposed to overcrowding and/or multiple moves in one year, were more often reported by their caregivers to have poor health, impaired educational, social or emotional skills, and were measured to have low weight compared to other children ([2019 Princeton/Eviction Lab](#)). In older children and adolescents, a history of multiple moves has been associated with mental health problems later in life including violence and suicide ([AJPM, 2016](#)). Homelessness can be deadly. The homeless have a 5-10 x higher mortality than the housed with average life expectancy was 53 years on one study out of Boston ([JAMA Mortality of Unsheltered Adults 2016](#)). And this is before the Covid-19 pandemic, which has greatly exacerbated health challenges for those with housing instability. .

Chesapeake PSR is a member of the Renters United Maryland, a statewide coalition of renters, organizers, and advocates, and **we urge the Committee's report of Favorable on SB 504.**