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TESTIMONY ON HB1117 - POSITION: FAVORABLE
Tenant Safety Act

TO: Chair Korman, Vice Chair Boyce, and members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee

FROM: Anna T. Levy, on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ)

My name is Anna T. Levy and I am a resident of District 16 in North Bethesda. On behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ), I am submitting this testimony in support of HB1117, the Tenant Safety Act. JUFJ organizes 6,000 Jews and allies from across the state in support of social, racial, and economic justice campaigns.

Jewish sacred texts recognize that people having safe, stable housing is key to a healthy society. Access to safe and stable housing has far-reaching economic, health, and social benefits for individuals, families, and communities, and is key to reducing racial inequities.

I feel very fortunate to live in housing that is safe and well-maintained. But, I am aware that too many Maryland renters live in unconscionably unsafe conditions, with inoperable plumbing, heating or air conditioning; leaks that cause life-threatening mold; and infestations of pests such as rodents and roaches. Most often these tenants are Black and brown families that include children and vulnerable adults who are most at risk for negative health effects – such as asthma – from exposure to these dangerous conditions. And although landlords are required to maintain safe properties, some are not willing to do the necessary repairs, putting tenants and communities at risk.

Current state law creates unnecessary barriers for renters who seek justice from landlords who refuse to make repairs. Currently, under Maryland state law, a tenant can escrow rent to file a case about unsafe conditions. However, many of those most affected lack the financial means to escrow rent, are therefore not able to pursue legal remedy, and likely wouldn't be able to afford legal counsel depending on the case even if they could successfully file one. They do not have the option of filing as a group, either, since groups of tenants facing the same substandard living conditions must file actions individually, and cannot file a collective rent escrow case.

The Tenant Safety Act would remedy these barriers by addressing two growing concerns of Maryland renters: (1) the need for safer housing conditions, and (2) the need to lower the barriers to courts to address poor housing conditions. The bill would also increase court efficiency by compiling conditions related to a property owned by a particular landlord into a single proceeding and provide for attorney's fees so that tenant groups can obtain counsel to manage their collective cases.

The Tenant Safety Act would empower tenants to jointly seek legal justice for substandard living conditions and hold their landlords accountable when there is no intention to remedy the situation. The Tenant Safety Act is good for the safety and well-being of Marylanders, providing them with the resources they need to live in a safe place.

On behalf of Jews United for Justice, I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB1117, The Tenant Safety Act.