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HB0339 – Real Property – Residential Rental Apartments – Air-Conditioning Requirements

Hearing Before the Environment and Transportation Committee February 4, 2025

Position: FAVORABLE

To the Honorable Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

Community Legal Services (CLS) appreciates the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of HB0339. CLS provides free legal services to support and advocate for the rights and well-being of Maryland’s most under-served communities. Much of what we do involves supporting housing stability and ensuring healthy housing conditions for individuals and families, many of whom reside in rental apartments. For residents of Maryland, requiring apartment complexes to have air conditioning is not just a matter promoting comfort and convenience. Rather, it is a matter of protecting the health and safety of Maryland renters.

Heat Exposure Presents Significant Public Health Risks

Maryland’s summers are growing hotter, with prolonged periods of extreme heat becoming more and more frequent. The health risks associated with excessive indoor heat are well-documented and severe. Heat exposure can cause dehydration, heat exhaustion, and life-threatening heat stroke. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes extreme heat as one of the deadliest weather-related hazards in the United States, with older adults, infants, and individuals with preexisting health conditions at greatest risk.

We often represent clients who are elderly, families with young children, and individuals with illnesses or mobility limitations for whom leaving home is complicated and infrequent. Summers are particularly hard for these clients. For elderly tenants, high indoor temperatures can exacerbate chronic health issues such as heart disease, respiratory conditions, and hypertension. Babies and young children, whose bodies cannot regulate temperature as efficiently as adults, are also highly susceptible to heat-related illnesses. Without air conditioning, these vulnerable populations face unnecessary and preventable health crises every summer.

The Disproportionate Impact on Low-Income Renters

Representing low to moderate income clients, we have seen firsthand how unbearable heat conditions force tenants to choose between their housing and their health during Maryland summers, especially those who live in older buildings that were not designed to withstand Maryland's increasingly hot summers. Individuals and families with limited financial resources are often left to endure dangerous indoor temperatures because they lack the funding needed to install or maintain air conditioning units on their own. Furthermore, low-income households are particularly hard hit by the cost of medical care and potential lost earnings when heat-related illnesses arise. They are also less able to relocate or seek alternative cooling options, such as staying in air-conditioned public spaces, which may not be accessible due to transportation barriers or limited hours.

We Respectfully Urge this Committee to Issue a Favorable Report on HB0339

While this bill does not represent an immediate fix for all tenants in apartment housing, requiring air conditioning to be included in newly constructed buildings and requiring the installation of air conditioning in older apartment buildings when HVAC systems are repaired or replaced, Maryland will take a big step forward in addressing these health risks to Maryland residents. Without the solution provided with HB0339, however, exposure to extreme indoor heat will continue to place the health and safety of low-income renters at risk.

Maryland has long required landlords to provide heat during cold months because lawmakers recognize that extreme cold is a public health risk. The same logic must apply to extreme heat. HB 0339 would respond to this anomaly by ensuring that all residential rental apartments provide air conditioning that can maintain safe indoor temperatures during the summer months. This bill is a necessary and reasonable measure to protect tenants' health, safety, and quality of life. No Marylander should suffer heat-related illness or death simply because they cannot afford an air-conditioned home. House Bill 0339 is a crucial step toward ensuring safe and habitable housing for all renters. For these reasons, **Community Legal Services urges this committee to submit a favorable report on HB0392.**

Please feel free to reach out to Lisa Sarro, Community Legal Services Director of Litigation and Advocacy, with any questions at sarro@clspgc.org.