

February 9, 2021

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB454/HB52

**Real Property – Alterations in Actions for Repossession and Establishment of
Eviction Diversion Program**

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Michael English

My name is Michel English. I live in Silver Spring Maryland in District 20. This testimony is in support of SB454/HB52, Real Property – Alterations in Actions for Repossession and Establishment of Eviction Diversion Program. SB454/HB52 would bring about sorely needed rent court reform. There are several reasons I support this bill, but I think telling you a bit about my own housing story could help explain why it is so important to me.

While I was fortunate enough to buy a condo in downtown Silver Spring a little over a year ago, I rented in the area since 2012, and am no more or less a part of the community than I was when I lived a half mile down the road in a place where my name wasn't on the deed. Renters make up the lifeblood of many areas in Montgomery County and across the state, yet even before the pandemic, they face less long term stability due to rising costs over time, and more uncertainty in their living situation. While rents have settled down a bit during the pandemic, this reprieve is likely temporary and, more to the point, has been replaced with a more acute and devastating one, displacement and job loss from the crippling economic impacts of the ongoing pandemic.

Safe and stable housing has far reaching economic, health, and social benefits to individuals, families, and communities, and is key to reducing racial inequities, as the most marginalized are often the first to have their housing threatened. Renters are more likely to work the very kind of food service, customer service, retail, and other jobs that have been decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic and related closure orders. These measures are necessary from a public health standpoint, but when we don't give people the ability to earn the money needed to pay

rent, we can't allow them to risk being kicked out on the street when the current rent court system dramatically favors landlords. This bill, sponsored by Senator Sydnor and Delegate Wells, would make several important reforms to the state's rent court system to protect renters well beyond the immediate consequences of the pandemic.

The bill would increase the potential for alternative resolutions to eviction by establishing a formal pre-trial structure for service providers to engage renters and landlords and for judges to order alternative dispute resolution if deemed appropriate. These changes would move the default decision away from eviction and towards something that doesn't ruin a person's housing situation for years to come. Further, when no alternative resolution can be reached, the bill would make trials more even-handed by allowing renters time to seek counsel and to adequately prepare for trial. If a tough decision needs to be made, it's only fair that both sides have the ability to make their best arguments. Finally, the bill would give judges broader power to order stays of evictions in emergency situations, allowing time for renters to relocate as optimally as possible should that be deemed necessary.

This last point is not to be dismissed. Not only is this a fair and moral measure, but a wise one from a public health standpoint. Obviously, throwing people out on the streets during a pandemic is a risk to their health and others with the lack of access to privacy and sanitation. Further, even if those evicted can shelter with friends or family, that is more people in a smaller space, risking further community spread of COVID. Helping them find the safest possible accommodations is in everyone's interest.

Please do the right thing and pass SB454/HB52 out of committee to help prevent evictions, keep people in their homes, and make our state's rent court system more fair. **Thank you and I urge a favorable report on SB454/HB52.**