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Michael English
Silver Spring MD, 20910

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS OF HBI312/SB910
COVID-19 Eviction and Housing Relief Act of 2021

TO: Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Atterbeary, and members of the Judiciary Committee
FROM: Michael English

My name is Michael English. I live in Silver Spring Maryland in District 20. This testimony is in support of HBI312, COVID-19 Eviction Protection and Relief Act of 2019. HBI312 would help make sure the most vulnerable among us are protected at one of the most trying times in our history. There are several reasons I support this bill, but I think telling you a bit about my own housing story could help explain why I believe it is so important.

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. This bill, sponsored by Senator

Smith and Delegate Wilkins, would make several important reforms to make sure people aren't left in the cold, literally and figuratively, in the middle of a pandemic.

Primarily, the bill would expand and extend upon Governor Hogan's executive order and a related CDC order to protect against people being evicted for non-payment of rent through April 2022. Failure to pay can be legitimate grounds for eviction in normal times, but these times are hardly normal. Not only are many people struggling for reasons beyond their control, making such a punishment unfair but doing so would increase their risk of transmission, and therefore the entire state's, without a place for them to safely distance from others. 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 maintain current accommodations is in everyone's interest.

The bill would also helpfully ban late fees and interest from occurring during this time, which is important so that people aren't just buried under an ever increasing mountain of costs as they struggle with back rent they will still owe under this bill. It would also require renters be offered payment plans for failure to pay before being taken to court, an important incentive for compromise as an eviction can ruin people's housing prospects for years to come. While some of these measures could put some landlords in a tough spot, the bill does what I think is a good job of trying to deal with that issue, and landlords are already struggling with shortfalls that this bill could help deal with. Specifically, the bill would create a program to mandate matching state/county budget funds for landlords to provide rent forgiveness, with payments made directly to the landlord in lieu of payment from the renter.

Please do the right thing and pass this bill. **I respectfully urge a favorable report for HB1312/SB910.**