

Dear Respected Legislators,

My name is Simin Li and I'm a University of Maryland, College Park alumni. I was a tenant of South Campus Commons (SCC) and suffered from the inconsistent, disrespectful, and distressing responses from SCC, Capstone, MEDCO, and the University of Maryland.

This scarring experience began when I signed my lease for the 2020-2021 academic school year in February 2020. With the extreme student housing deficit and convoluted leasing process at UMD, most students are eager to sign these leases despite it being 6 months before the lease starts in August. However, a month later, UMD announced that the campus would be closed. Capstone actively encouraged students to stay home on March 25th, 2020. At that time, I still planned to go back to campus. But as the pandemic worsened, and UMD announced on July 15th, 2020 that all my classes would be online, I knew I did not want to be on campus.

On June 30th, UMD rightfully gave students the option to cancel their 2020-2021 leases with an addendum that included new COVID-19 Rules and Regulations. Yet, South Campus Commons and Courtyards (MEDCO owned public-private student housing) did not provide the same option, despite using nearly identical Rules and Regulations updates as an "addendum", and informing us that *"Residents should acknowledge the contagious nature of COVID-19 and voluntarily assume the risk that they may be exposed to or infected by COVID-19 on campus and that such exposure or infection may result in serious illness and/or death."*

I was distraught. I was now tied to a useless lease worth over \$11,000, meaning I would have to move back home to live in an extremely high-stress environment. As someone who worked year-round with multiple jobs and internships to pay for tuition and housing, this weighed heavily on me. This was on top of dealing with a global pandemic.

But, I found hope when I saw a viral social media post about a fellow SCC tenant who got out of their lease because their parent, who was a lawyer, knew that this was not legally sound, and complained to the leasing office. I immediately emailed the leasing office. However, I faced a slap in the face when the leasing office denied that any student was let out of their lease. They flippantly said you can only get out of a lease by releasing, which was laughable given the pandemic.

Desperate to get out of this lease, over one hundred students and I banded together to find a lawyer to help us. We endured patronizing, contradictory, and accusatory emails from UMD staff, MEDCO officials, and Capstone, who all shamed us for trying to avoid dire financial distress in the middle of a pandemic. We were terrified and confused. But we utilized all our skill-sets to organize protests, got local, state, and national coverage, and finally reached our state representatives. This was all on top of school, work, and life.

I fervently urge legislators to pass this bill. Untangling the bureaucratic ties between schools, state-sponsored orgs, and national leasing offices, with the threat of crushing debt, is not the responsibility of students. MD student housing has long been unfair, nearing predatory, protected by policies that students are too overwhelmed to fight. For us, MEDCO knew the gravity of the pandemic when they handed us that "addendum". Despite our activism, many students still stuck with their leases and stayed in the building, out of fear of retaliation. We need this bill as it will help create a more transparent process that will benefit the wellbeing of all who care about students and the state.

Sincerely,
Simin Li (with UMDTenants)