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Judicial Proceedings Committee

Joint Committee on Children, Youth,
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Joint Committee on the Chesapeake
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TESTIMONY OF SENATOR SHELLY HETTLEMAN

SB384 Landlord and Tenant - Stay of Eviction Proceeding for Rental Assistance Determination

SB 384 requires judges to pause eviction proceedings when the tenant provides evidence that a request for rental assistance is pending. In the face of COVID-19, thousands of Maryland renters have struggled and continue to struggle to meet their rental obligations as they faced illness, were laid off as businesses closed, juggled child care demands and limited school operating hours, or lost their jobs. The federal government responded to the need by creating the Emergency Rental Assistance Program that has provided the state with nearly \$750 million to assist renters who have experienced COVID-related challenges paying their rent.

It has taken a long time for our local governments to scale up efforts to distribute this unprecedented amount of aid. Local jurisdictions each took different approaches to addressing their community's needs and there were many delays as counties stood up their newly funded programs.

The amount of aid Maryland has received is more than sufficient to meet the hundreds of thousands of dollars of rental debt. Yet, thousands of failure to pay rent motions were filed with the courts. And even if these motions were dismissed, as many were, they still have a negative impact on the tenant that can haunt them for years.

Landlords filed nearly 345,000 eviction motions for Failure to Pay Rent over the past year and judges had no authority to delay proceedings, even when they were presented with evidence that an application for Emergency Rental Assistance was pending or if a landlord refused to accept a rental assistance check.

SB 384 provides authority for the court to press pause on eviction proceedings until such time as the county processes the rental assistance application and it protects renters from the potentially catastrophic consequences of having an eviction proceeding on their credit record.

The Department of Housing and Community Development's data dashboard shows the inequities of eviction. Of the over 72,000 applications for rental assistance received, 70% are from Black and Brown people, 70% are women, and just under half of people applying have been unemployed for over three months. The average rental debt owed is \$4,614. A targeted bill like this will help protect families who have been left behind in the post-pandemic recovery. It is important to remember that this money does not go to the tenants. This money goes to landlords, but it keeps people in their homes and connected to their communities. Thank you.