

Dear Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with CASA de Maryland and Renter's United. I am a resident of MD District 41. I live in the Roland Park neighborhood of Baltimore City. **I am testifying in support of House Bill 703.**



HB 703 would do two things. First, it requires landlords to show their valid rental license at the trial of any residential eviction action, except those facilitated by actions of a tenant that “*demonstrates a clear and imminent danger*” to themselves or others. Secondly, the bill enables courts to rule in favor of the tenant (and award them court costs and expenses) should a landlord attempt to use this potential-safety-risk grounds exemption to evict in bad faith. This ensures that unlicensed landlords don’t use this exception as a low-stakes back channel for evicting tenants on false pretenses and bypassing the intent of the first provision.

While rental licenses are necessary to lawfully operate rental properties within most Maryland counties and cities, unlicensed landlords, *operating unlawfully*, are still entitled to specialized eviction proceedings without having to show proof of a valid license. This system incentivizes non-compliance with local laws and hampers efforts to ensure safe and secure rental housing for all Maryland citizens. An egregious example of the nonsensical system this creates is evidenced in *Velicky v. Copy Cat Building*, where the court held that unlicensed landlords can resort to using Tenant Holding Over eviction actions (when a landlord must give written notification and a prescribed amount of notice to evict a tenant after the term of a lease has expired) if their attempts to use “failure to pay rent”-based eviction actions were refused by the court. Unlicensed landlords’ use of the Tenant Holding Over eviction action is an attempt to circumvent the eviction prevention measures Maryland has put in place to address pandemic-specific rental housing hardship. HB 703 addresses this obvious inequity by simply requiring landlords to show proof of their license in court, thus reducing the volume of unjust claims (and evictions).

The fire that took the lives of 17 people in New York last month was enabled by below-code rental operations *that were known and allowed to continue*. Everything from poorly-functioning heating, which required tenants to use their own supplemental heating elements, to faulty doors that didn’t close properly, allowed the fire to start and spread rapidly throughout the building. A system that enables landlords to operate business as usual with no oversight is inevitably headed towards a similarly dark future. Please, let’s do better in Maryland. Give courts the legal teeth needed to protect renters from nefarious eviction proceedings brought by unlicensed landlords – by simply requiring landlords show proof of their license during court proceedings.

It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of HB 703**.

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Johnson
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Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore