

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
**HB 691 – Landlord and Tenant - Failure to Repair Serious and
Dangerous Defects - Tenant Remedies (Tenant Safety Act)**

House Environment and Transportation Committee
February 24, 2023



Health Care for the Homeless supports HB 691, which will markedly improve unsafe and uninhabitable living conditions faced by tenants. This bill would enable a single tenant to file a rent escrow case about building and unit conditions on behalf of multiple tenants or a tenants' association. Moreover, the bill holds landlords accountable for serious conditions of disrepair that threaten the lives, health and safety of multiple occupants with the same landlord.

Health Care for the Homeless serves many clients, both individuals and families experience homelessness or housing insecurity, who are forced to live in unsafe and unhealthy housing conditions. Frequently, our clients live in dangerous conditions because they have no other housing options. It often takes landlords a long time to resolve these conditions, if at all. Maintenance issues are rampant in public housing, in particular. Our supportive housing team works closely with property managers to address issues facing clients in their housing situation. In many instances, it has taken multiple staff from our supportive housing team to follow up with property managers to ensure actions were taken to remediate the dangerous conditions in our client's home.

Many of these hazardous living conditions are particularly harmful to children. As our supportive housing providers and case managers can attest, children living in hazardous conditions experiences effects well beyond just the home, including missed school days, frequent or long ED visits, impacts on their physical activity and social activities, etc.

Under current state law, groups of tenants facing the same substandard living conditions with no intention from the landlord to remedy the situation are not able to file a collective rent escrow case or a class action case about conditions. Instead, they each individually have to file the action and are often filing with representation. This system is entirely inefficient and also does not yield the necessary results in order to protect the health and safety of tenants. This legislation addresses two growing concerns of Maryland renters: (1) their need for safer housing conditions, and (2) the need to lower the barrier of entry to courts to address poor housing conditions. This bill ensures landlord accountability by enabling tenants to seek damages and attorney's fees from negligent landlords who refuse to make necessary repairs to uninhabitable conditions.

We know that mortality among those experiencing homelessness has escalated over the last 5-10 years. Individuals and families experiencing homelessness should never be forced to live in unsafe conditions. There is no amount of health care that can substitute stable and healthy housing.

For the health and safety of the clients we serve and for all Marylanders, Health Care for the Homeless urges a favorable report on HB 691.

Health Care for the Homeless is a member of Renters United Maryland (RUM), which is a coalition of independent non-profit, legal services, and community-based organizations. RUM's vision is a Maryland in which renters live in safe and affordable housing and have security of tenure. As a member of RUM, Health Care for the Homeless asks for a favorable report on this legislation. See Renters United Maryland's Housing Justice plan for the 2023 legislative session here: <https://rentersunitedmaryland.org/>.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 10,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.

Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.

For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.