

Dear Members of the Environment and Transportation 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 & Renters United Maryland. I am a resident of District 41. **I am testifying in support of the Tenant Safety Act (HB0691).**



This bill would enable a group of tenants with the same landlord facing similar issues in the same property to join a single rent escrow action together, much as a similar law currently does in New York City<sup>1</sup>. Under this law, tenants could make use of the rent escrow process without each having to create a separate filing, ensuring tenants who may be behind on rent are still able to demand remedies from their landlords to potentially life-threatening conditions. It would also provide for attorney's fees and damages in these group actions to ensure groups of tenants could enlist the assistance of counsel in organizing a case.

At present in Maryland, a group of tenants experiencing the same substandard living conditions from the same landlord each have to file an action individually, and if they do file, they frequently do not have the benefit of representation as it can be challenging to afford counsel. Even when tenants are able to file, as has been the case in Baltimore for decades, only 6% of cases in rent court result in reduced rent, according to a Baltimore Sun review of over 5,500 cases from 2010 to 2016<sup>2</sup>.

Maryland was ranked 32nd among the 50 states for severe housing problems in a recent analysis of US Housing & Urban Development data from 2015-2019<sup>3</sup>. Our state should be leading the nation at providing safe housing. Instead, we have too many properties bearing significant safety issues like insufficient kitchen or plumbing facilities often rented by tenants who cannot afford to raise the issue and get redress.

This legislation addresses two growing concerns among Marylanders: first, their need for safer housing conditions, and second, the need to lower the barrier of entry to courts to address poor housing conditions. Remarkably, this bill addresses both concerns *while increasing court efficiency*. Since conditions issues cases can be compiled across a particular property owned by a particular landlord into a single proceeding, the courts are saved the administrative burden of duplicative cases. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of HB0691**. Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Bonnie Weissberg  
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Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/RPP/230>

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.baltimoresun.com/news/dismisssed/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/severe\\_housing\\_problems/state/MD](https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/severe_housing_problems/state/MD)

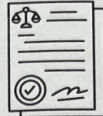
## Tenant Safety Act: Create a legal tool for tenants to win repairs together

Delegate Vaughn Stewart

Under current state law, groups of tenant 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 without representation.

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. The bill will enable tenant groups with the same landlord to collectively file a single rent escrow case that would address all participating tenants' issues.

The bill would also increase court efficiency by compiling conditions issues related to a property owned by a particular landlord into a single proceeding and provide for attorney's fees so that tenant groups can obtain counsel to manage their collective cases.



### The Proposed Law is Tried and True:

The proposed law is based on a tool that already exists in New York City, which allows tenants in a single building to file a single conditions action against their landlord.



### Current Escrow Laws Are Inaccessible for Most Tenants:

The current law requires a tenant, unlike any other litigant, to pay in order to be heard in court. As a result, it is not fair to single out tenants when their challenge is about conditions, not their rent.



### Poor Escrow Outcomes for Tenants:

Even when tenants are able to file, only 6 percent of cases result in reduced rent, according to a Baltimore Sun review of over 5,000 cases.



### Bad Landlords Pay for Their Own Bad Behavior:

The bill provides for damages and attorney's fees so that landlords found liable under this proposed law are directly held accountable and required to reimburse renters.

Renters United Maryland is a coalition of advocates, organizers, policymakers and renters. To learn more about our work on these priorities and other legislation, visit [www.rentersunitedmaryland.org](http://www.rentersunitedmaryland.org)

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