



MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

KATE STEWART
COUNCILMEMBER
DISTRICT 4

HB 823/SB 689 – Fire Protection and Prevention - Residential Rental Property - Requirements (Melanie Nicholle Diaz Fire Safety Act)

Testimony of Kate Stewart, Montgomery County Councilmember, District 4

Position: SUPPORT

February 20, 2024

My name is Kate Stewart and I serve as the Montgomery County Councilmember for District 4 and as the Vice President of the Montgomery County Council. Today, I am speaking on behalf of myself in support of **Fire Protection and Prevention - Residential Rental Property - Requirements, the Melanie Nicholle Diaz Fire Safety Act (House Bill 823/Senate Bill 689)**, legislation that would establish certain requirements for installing fire safety equipment in residential rental high-rise buildings, enable local governments to grant property tax credits related to the installation of this equipment, and establish the Workgroup to Develop Fire Safety Best Practices for Pre-1974 High-Rise Buildings.

Last year, an apartment fire in Downtown Silver Spring resulted in the tragic loss of 25-year-old Melanie Diaz and her two dogs. It displaced over 400 residents and hospitalized 20 people, including firefighters responding to the incident. Unfortunately, the apartment complex was one of the 76 high-rise buildings located in Montgomery County without automatic sprinkler systems. Studies show that automatic sprinkler systems can reduce civilian deaths by fire by up to 87% and significantly decrease other negative outcomes, including property damage and environmental impact. While newer buildings now require them, many older high-rise apartments still lack this critical safety feature, putting residents at risk.

House Bill 823 is a significant step forward in protecting tenants living in older high-rise apartment buildings. It requires all residential rental high-rise buildings, regardless of construction date, to have smoke detection equipment consistent with the National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code in each public corridor as well as emergency lights in all common areas. This bill additionally ensures that deaf and hard-of-hearing tenants have visual alarms that are provided and paid for by the landlord and requires notice in both the lease and at entrances to the building if the complex has not yet been upgraded to include a full automatic sprinkler system. It also helps building owners by requiring the Department of Housing and Community Development to work with the State Fire Marshal and Maryland Department of Emergency Management to identify funding sources to help building owners meet these requirements and install complete automatic sprinkler systems.

Increased fire safety equipment and information in all high-rise buildings is essential to the safety and well-being of residents and in preventing future fire tragedies. I urge this committee to vote favorably for House Bill 823 this legislative session. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter, and please don't hesitate to contact my office if you have further questions.