



BRANDON M. SCOTT
MAYOR

*Office of Government Relations
88 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401*

SB0481

February 29, 2024

TO: Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Nina Themelis, Director of Mayor's Office of Government Relations

RE: Senate Bill 481 – Renters Rights and Stabilization Act of 2024

POSITION: Support

Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Administration (BCA) **supports** Senate Bill (SB) 481.

SB 481 would enhance protections for renters, strengthen the enforcement of existing laws, and reduces the impact of evictions on Baltimore families.

A number of key components of the legislation include strategies the BCA supports or are already reflected in the work underway in the City, such as establishing the Office of Tenant Rights (“OTR”), increasing eviction filing fees to fund critical programs, voucher program prioritization, new renter protections and new reporting requirements. The BCA is committed to working with the Governor and the Administration to continue to discuss how to protect tenants’ rights before and during the course of eviction.

Baltimore City renters already enjoy some additional protections assisted by the work of Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). Some of the contributions to the arena of tenant protections include:

- Using CDBG-COVID and other sources to fund the provision of legal advice, and, in some cases, representation to renters facing eviction and other landlord-tenant issues through local nonprofits such as Maryland Legal Aid, Public Justice Center, Homeless Persons Representation Project, Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland/Tenant Volunteer Lawyer of the Day Program, Disability Rights Maryland and the Maryland Courts Self-Help Center. SB 481 would help to address capacity limitations.
- DHCD’s Code Enforcement & Legal Division pursue litigation of problem landlords and issue notices and citations to tenants for violations they are responsible for under the code. DHCD dedicates three property maintenance inspectors that serve as “escrow inspectors” for the Court in rent escrow actions. These inspectors conduct investigations as a result of

an escrow case and testify in rent Court. DHCD attorneys prosecute illegal lockouts/denial of essential services charges and pursue actions against landlords who demonstrate a pattern of failing to comply with outstanding violation notices. In other instances, DHCD can file nuisance actions against tenants for criminal activity that may result in eviction under the State Drug Nuisance statute.

- DHCD property and registration staff provide copies of license verification documents for tenants to use in Court when seeking to defend failure to pay rent cases in unlicensed properties. The intersection of code enforcement and evictions often lead to DHCD's frequent contact with rent court.

DHCD has also been working with the District Court, the Sheriff's Office and legal assistance providers to leverage resources outside the legal system to protect Baltimore families from eviction. DHCD has been working to implement City Council Bill 20-0625 Landlord-Tenant - Right to Counsel in Eviction Cases¹ which provides eligible tenants with access to counsel in eviction proceedings.

SB 481 would coalesce existing rights, add tenants' rights of first refusal, add the right not to be evicted in emergencies, cap security deposits at one month's rent and prioritizes vouchers for households with children under 5, among other changes. A number of key components of the legislation enhance or expand protections for renters that are desperately needed for Baltimore families.

For these reasons, the BCA respectfully request a **favorable** report on SB 481.

¹ <https://baltimore.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4659244&GUID=77F2AE9E-8F22-4DA9-8248-775803D3C766&Options=ID%7CText%7C&Search=20-0625>