



2714 Hudson Street
Baltimore, MD 21224-4716
P: 410-534-6447
F: 410-534-6475
www.ghhi.org

February 28, 2024

Senator William C. Smith, Jr., Chair
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
2 East
Miller Seante Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Senator Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
2 West
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: **FAVORABLE** – SB481 – Renters’ Rights and Stabilization Act of 2024

Dear Chairmen Smith and Feldman and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Green & Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI), I write in support of SB481. I serve as Chair of the Maryland Lead Poisoning Prevention Commission and as a member of the EPA Children’s Health Protection Advisory Committee, the CDC Lead Exposure and Prevention Advisory Committee and the Maryland Green and Healthy Homes Task Force. GHHI is dedicated to addressing the social determinants of health and advancing racial and health equity through the creation of healthy, lead safe and energy efficient homes. GHHI has been at the frontline of lead poisoning prevention and holistic healthy housing for over three decades.

Over its 30-year history, GHHI has developed the holistic energy efficiency, health and housing service delivery model that is implemented in our nationally recognized, Maryland-based direct service program. The model was adopted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and is currently being advanced in partner jurisdictions nationally. In addition, GHHI helped to elevate Maryland as a national leader in healthy housing by helping reduce childhood lead poisoning by 99% in the state and helping design over 49 pieces of healthy housing legislation that became law in the State of Maryland and local jurisdictions. By delivering a standard of excellence, GHHI aims to eradicate the negative health impacts of unhealthy housing and unjust policies to ensure better health, economic, and social outcomes for children, seniors and families with an emphasis on Black and Brown low-income communities. GHHI’s holistic intervention approach was recently cited by EPA and HUD as a model for effective coordination of federal healthy homes and weatherization programs and resources.

GHHI Written Testimony – Senate Bill 481
February 28, 2024
Page Two

We are deeply committed in our mission to advance racial and health equity, economic mobility and climate resiliency through healthy and energy efficient low-income homes. GHHI represents tenants across the state for the repair of unsafe housing conditions and provides rental property owner compliance assistance to assist owners in understating their responsibilities under various Maryland laws. By helping improve rental housing affordability and standards, SB481 will play an important role advancing housing stability in Maryland.

SB481's provision setting the maximum allowable security deposit to be one month's rent is critical to addressing both the barriers to tenants obtaining safe housing and their ability to remain in their rental homes. Rental housing affordability is a significant barrier for low income households. Increased security deposits and monthly rental rates are placing financial stress on tenants and contributing to higher tenant eviction rates. Requiring double or greater amounts for security deposits means that many tenants cannot afford the basic requirements to be approved for a rental property as part of the application process. In addition, by requiring double security deposits, tenants are often using up all of their available income and savings to pay the high security deposit cost and starting out their tenancy under financial duress. In other cases, tenants are borrowing funds to pay the double security deposit and increasing their financial debts – placing them in jeopardy to meet their rental obligations in future months. Lastly, exorbitant security deposit requirements also impedes tenant's mobility to move to other areas and counties to seek employment, educational opportunities and better housing for themselves and their families. SB481 is an important tool to address these barriers.

Quality rental housing that is lead certified in accordance with the state law and that meets basic local housing code should not be priced out of reach of low and moderate Maryland residents by requirement of excessive security deposits payments. SB481 is needed to set reasonable security deposit limits that do not force tenants to have to settle for unsafe and poor quality rental housing that places themselves and their families at risk of lead poisoning, household injury, mold, poor indoor air quality and other hazardous conditions.

We applaud the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development for advocating for the establishment of the Office of Tenant's Rights within the Department. This Office will play an important role in helping to improve housing standards in rental housing, improving tenant rights education and rental property owner compliance assistance on rights and responsibilities, and supporting tenant's rights on key issues and initiatives related to rental housing.

Baltimore City has long maintained a right of first refusal in its local law and SB481 will place into state statute that important right of first refusal for tenants to be provide the opportunity to purchase their rental home. The right of first refusal will increase homeownership opportunities while improving housing stability for tenants who are not forced to permanently relocate.

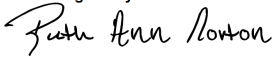
GHHI Written Testimony – Senate Bill 481
February 28, 2024
Page Three

While we support efforts to reduce the abuse and overuse of the District Court rent court process through serial eviction filings by rental property owners that add repeated monthly courts costs to tenant's ledgers and contribute to higher tenant eviction rates, it is important that the increased court filing fees are not passed on to tenants. By increasing the court filing fees for eviction proceedings with the intention to deter rental property owners from habitually filing Failure To Pay Rent actions immediately each month, there remains a risk, however, that tenants could be placed at greater financial peril through increased court costs if owners are permitted to pass those fees onto the tenant each month. The increased filing fee provisions of SB481 must only be passed if strong protections and practices are also included in the Bill that prevent tenants from bearing the financial burden of these increased court costs. Otherwise, greater tenant financial instability and higher tenant eviction rates will surely be the consequence.

There is a significant need in jurisdictions throughout Maryland for increased funding for Rental Assistance Programs and Housing Choice Voucher Programs that support low and moderate income tenants in moving from hazardous or defective housing to lead certified, housing code compliant housing that is safe and affordable. GHHI supports the use of revenue generated from the increased court filing fees under SB481 to expand the resources available for these important programs that help tenants in moving to and affording safer housing.

SB481 is reasonable legislation that is needed to cap security deposit amounts and help maintain a stock of affordable rental housing. SB481 will also improve tenant mobility and ensure greater access to safe rental housing for low and moderate income residents in Maryland. We ask for a Favorable Report on SB481.

Respectfully Submitted,

DocuSigned by:

1A42B3060D6A435...
Ruth Ann Norton
President and CEO