

SB644_MarkMartin_FAV

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TESTIMONY ON SB644 – POSITION: FAVORABLE (Landlord and Tenant-Residential Leases and Holdover Tenancies-Local Just Cause Termination Provisions)

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Mark Martin

My name is Mark Martin and I am a longtime resident of District 40 in Baltimore City. This testimony is in support of SB644.

Stable housing is critical for a healthy, prosperous, and safe community. Maryland law currently works against this goal by leaving tenants vulnerable to losing their homes through no fault of their own just because their landlord refuses to renew their lease. Lease nonrenewals (evictions) undermine family and neighborhood stability and threaten the health and education of children, particularly people of color. Further, evictions cost governments substantial amounts of money, as uprooted tenants are forced to draw more heavily on public services. The problem is only getting worse: lease nonrenewals are on the rise, surpassing pre-pandemic levels.

SB644 begins to rectify this problem. It authorizes counties, and Baltimore City, to enact locally appropriate laws that would require a landlord to renew a lease unless he has a valid reason (a “just cause”) not to. The bill therefore promises to do a great deal of good by redressing the power imbalance between landlords and tenants, safeguarding tenants from arbitrary and retaliatory evictions, and, thereby, facilitating access to stable and habitable housing and all the individual and societal benefits associated with it.

At the same time, the bill should protect the *legitimate* interests of landlords. Just cause eviction laws typically leave landlords free not to renew the leases of problem tenants (e.g., those who fail to pay rent, cause damage, or are disruptive), to reasonably raise rents, or to dispossess tenants in order to remove a property from the rental market, to take it back for temporary personal use, or renovate it

This is a proven path. I am a (retired) lawyer with experience in Landlord-Tenant court in the District of Columbia, which provides tenants with a right to just cause eviction. DC's law has not caused the sky to fall on the DC rental market or DC landlords. To the contrary. Many other states (e.g., New Jersey, California, Oregon, New Hampshire, and Washington) and cities (e.g., Seattle, Oakland, Boston, and Philadelphia) afford similar protections to tenants, which have generally had the effect of reducing evictions without undermining the housing market. Baltimore City itself adopted such a law in 2021, but has been blocked from implementing it by contrary State law.

It is time for Maryland to join these other jurisdictions. SB644 would add much needed balance to State law. The reforms it enables are a commonsense, workable step to helping tenants stay in their homes, and thereby reduce social dislocation and promote equality, without jeopardizing landlords' reasonable interests.

I urge the committee to return a favorable report on SB644.