



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

February 20, 2025

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

My name is Dan Reed and I serve as the Maryland Policy Director for [Greater Greater Washington](#), a nonprofit that works to advance sustainability and equity in housing, land use, and transportation throughout Greater Washington and beyond. **GGWash strongly supports House Bill 489**, which could help address our chronic housing shortage while increasing access to fire-safe homes.

This bill is simple: it would direct the Department of Labor, which is responsible for building codes, to identify ways that Maryland could legalize single-stair residential buildings up to six stories and make legislative and regulatory recommendations by December 1, 2025.


Today, the state requires that even small apartment buildings with as few as four units have two internal staircases connected by a hallway. This makes it harder to difficult and expensive to build apartments in constrained settings, like infill lots in older neighborhoods or the retrofit of a historic building, or to create larger, family-sized apartments¹. One consequence is that most apartments get built in large complexes, which require more land and expensive materials, driving up costs. It also means fewer homes get built, contributing to our housing shortage and increasing the cost of existing homes.

Fewer new homes mean fewer homes that adhere to modern fire safety requirements. Two-thirds of homes in Maryland were built before 1990, when the state began requiring sprinklers in new homes². In Baltimore City, the median home was built in 1948, the third-highest median home age in the nation³. The United States, which requires two stairs, has worse fire safety outcomes than many countries in Europe that only require one stair, while

¹ <https://vcnva.org/single-staircases-encourage-sustainable-housing/>

² 2023 American Community Survey.

³ <https://www.citybiz.co/article/311527/baltimore-has-the-3rd-highest-median-home-age-in-the-u-s/>

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jurisdictions in the US that allow single-stair buildings, like Seattle and Honolulu, require additional fire protection measures⁴. Virginia conducted its own study of single-stair building codes last year that highlighted several of those interventions, like early smoke detection, mechanical smoke ventilation systems, and limiting the number of units per floor⁵.

This issue is personal for me: I grew up in a 900-unit, 1960s-era high-rise apartment complex in Montgomery County without sprinklers, where fires were a regular occurrence⁶. Two years ago this month, a catastrophic fire displaced hundreds of people and took the life of a young woman trying to flee the building. The fire marshal's report found that a single sprinkler could have prevented this tragedy⁷.

Maryland needs more homes, and Marylanders deserve to have access to homes with modern fire safety protections. This bill will help us figure out how to make that happen as soon as we can. We ask the Environment and Transportation Committee for a favorable report.

Sincerely,

Dan Reed
Maryland Policy Director

⁴ <https://www.niskanencenter.org/understanding-single-stair-reform-efforts-across-the-united-states/>

⁵ <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2024/RD845/PDF>

⁶ <https://ggwash.org/view/88804/it-shouldnt-have-happened-again-but-it-did>

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<https://www.sourceofthespring.com/silver-spring-news/2803718/maryland-fire-marshall-sprinklers-could-have-prevented-fire-at-silver-spring-apartment-complex/>