

**Testimony in Support of SB 46**  
**Patrice Onwuka**  
**A resident of Bowie, Maryland**

Thank you to the chairman and committee for allowing me to testify today.

My name is Patrice Onwuka. I am a wife and mother of three boys. We reside in Bowie, MD. I am also the Director of the Center of Economic Opportunity at Independent Women. I am pleased to testify today in support of Senate Bill 46.

As a homeowner in this state, I am deeply worried about the growing presence of squatters. The rising trend of unauthorized individuals occupying property they do not own or rent presents a violation of property rights for homeowners, a blight to neighborhoods, and a costly nuisance for our communities.

I have had my own terrifying run-in with a squatter, and that experience still rocks me today. In 2023, when my husband and I were in the market to purchase a home, we toured a vacant single-family home in the Carney area of Baltimore County. This property was located in a quiet, middle-class residential neighborhood.

I wandered to the basement while my husband and the real estate agent were in another part of the house. As I approached the steps, I happened to catch a glimpse of movement reflected in the basement window. I assumed it was a cat moving about the basement, but out of caution I said "hello." Then, I heard a louder shuffling and realized it was not an animal. Yes, it was not an animal but an unauthorized male occupying the basement of the property. I was terrified.

Luckily, my husband and the agent came to get me. We immediately ran out of the house, fearful that he could have been armed or could have assaulted us. The real estate agent confirmed that no one should have been living in the property. I shudder to think what might have happened had I not lingered at the top of the steps for a moment. As a woman, I could have easily been overpowered and harmed by a man who had no authority and no permission to live in a house on the market for sale.

This was a jarring experience that could have led to a violent outcome. However, squatting incidents are becoming more common as individuals willingly flout the law and target livable spaces to take up residence. Mark Miller, senior attorney in Pacific Legal Foundation's Property Rights practice [noted](#) last year that squatting is "getting worse because of the lack of housing supply."

Right here in Maryland, there are chilling stories. A Prince George's County couple had just signed a contract with a bank to buy a vacant foreclosed home when the wife happened to see other people moving in. Another real estate agent [told local news](#) of a dozen similar stories of squatters occupying vacant homes for sale. A Beltsville woman [returned home](#) from vacation to find a couple lying in her bed, and all of her possessions totaling \$49,000 were gone.

Influencers are taking to social media with tips for squatting to popularize and normalize this activity.

Imagine, as a homeowner you return home from vacation or just purchased a house and find that someone else has occupied it. Your only recourse is to try to get them evicted, a process that can take weeks or months. As my examples illustrate, this can happen to anyone.

Trespassing is a violation of property rights, but it's more than a trivial legal issue. Squatters can damage properties, including those on the market to be sold, creating costly headaches for homeowners and making it difficult to sell vacant properties regardless of the damage or hardship that causes. Property values suffer when squatters, who have no incentive to maintain the property or may engage in other illegal activities, occupy property owned by someone else.

The challenge is evicting squatters quickly. For some jurisdictions such as Maryland, there is no legislation outlawing squatting or there is no clear legal path to have the trespassers removed expeditiously. These wrongdoers know that courts can move slowly on evictions. Furthermore, penalties are not strong enough to deter this activity. This emboldens squatters.

I'm pleased that Senator Ron Watson has introduced SB 46 to tackle this issue. This bill prohibits squatting and empowers homeowners to engage law enforcement to remove squatters. This is a welcomed step that fights to protect Marylanders from the devastating toll of squatting. I urge this committee and the entire legislature to pass SB46.