

# Baltimore City Sheriff's Office

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TO: Members of the Senate Finance Committee

FROM: Nicholas T.R. Blendy, Esq., Assistant Sheriff, Baltimore City Sheriff's Office

RE: House Bill 1456 – Consumer Protection - Residential Property Advertisement - Ownership Verification

DATE: April 1, 2026

**POSITION: FAVORABLE**

Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Sheriff's Office (BCSO) **supports** House Bill (HB) 1456.

If enacted, HB 1456 prohibits a commercial entity (including a social media platform) from publishing or advertising information on residential property available for lease or sale on behalf of another unless the commercial entity verifies either: (1) the individual posting the publication or advertisement that they the legal owner of the property or (2) that the individual is an agent of the aforementioned legal owner. A commercial entity has to maintain the record of the verification for at least three (3) years. A commercial entity that publishes or advertises information in violation of the bill's requirement must promptly remove the publication or advertisement. Violation of the bill is an unfair, abusive, or deceptive trade practice under the Maryland Consumer Protection Act (MCPA), subject to MCPA's civil and criminal penalty provisions.

The BCSO is the entity responsible for all court ordered evictions (via a District Court issued Warrant of Restitution) in Baltimore City. In calendar year 2024, the BCSO observed an abnormally high increase in wrongful detainer filings, which is the legal action that must be filed in order to have a court determine whether an individual is possessing real property without claim of right—including squatter cases. In conducting a review of specific cases, what the BCSO learned is that there appeared to be an increase in "dummy" or illegitimate leases being brandished by individuals who did not have a claim of right to a tenancy because the dummy lease was not authorized by the legal owner of the property or their agent. In some cases, these dummy leases may have been part of a dispute between the individual where they may have been involved in the creation of the lease, but in many other cases, we learned, the dummy lease was paid for via the person who thought they were paying for a tenancy, but

the reality was a third party bad actor had advertised the property and allegedly taken the money from the erstwhile prospective tenant who seems to have been operating in good faith.

After discussing this issue with the Assistant Attorney General assigned as counsel to the BCSO, as well as discussing the challenges and resources that need to be put into a criminal prosecution case with the local State's Attorney's Office and discussing this matter with tenant advocates, realtors, the public defender and other relevant partners, the BCSO has determined that pursuing new criminal penalties or enhancing the existing criminal penalties is not a thing we should advocate for more of. In short, if the goal is to prevent the action from occurring to protect the lawful owners of these properties as well as to protect prospective tenants from being defrauded in an online fraud scheme—which seems to be the anecdotal modus operandi of the situations we have investigated—what is the humane way forward to address this real problem we are seeing in Baltimore City?

Two things seem to be the best way to move forward. First, the General Assembly enacted and the Governor Chapter 188 (Senate Bill 46) of the Laws of Maryland of 2025, which created an expedited hearing process where wrongful detainer actions are required to be heard by a District Court judge in about as quick of a timeline as due process allows for—within 10 days of filing. This change has increased the amount of wrongful detainer actions we are seeing occur, which seems to be providing those individuals involved in these cases the opportunity to have a judge make a factual determination on the merits about the circumstances involved in these disputes.

The second is the idea behind HB 1456. By putting enhanced consumer protections and verifications around the mediums that individuals engage in the advertisement and publication of notice of potential real property for lease, this bill is designed to deter fraud schemes—often conducted by actors who are not even in the State of Maryland—from occurring in the first place. Moreover, by requiring a record be maintained by the commercial entity for three years, HB 1456 will aid local law enforcement, prosecutors, tenant advocate attorneys as well as attorneys for landlords, and judges with an electronic “paper trail” that should significantly aid in the factual determinations that need to be addressed in front of a judge in these, often very tense, disputes.

Best of all, HB 1456 is designed to positively impact the existing status quo in a way that creates no new crimes and enhances no existing criminal penalties—again, a very humane way to address a real and unique problem that primarily digital technology has made possible in the current landlord tenant law environment.

For the foregoing reasons, the BCSO respectfully requests a **favorable** report on HB 1456.