



**HB 847 - Criminal Law - Fraud - Possession of Residential Real Property
Hearing of the House Judiciary Committee on February 17, 2026**

Position: UNFAVORABLE

Dear Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility (CPSR) strongly opposed HB847. As physicians we know how harmful evictions are to our patients' health and why better solutions should be sought. For that reason, we are members of Renters United of Maryland. We urge an unfavorable report. HB 847 will 1) expand criminal law in a way that will be used against victims of rental scams, and 2) deny renters and other residents a meaningful opportunity to be heard in certain eviction cases leading to more evictions and homelessness. **This Committee heard numerous proposals in 2025 to address concerns about squatters and already expedited the judicial process to hear "wrongful detainer" cases by requiring a trial within 10 business days of filing a complaint.** This law went into effect on October 1, 2025, and we urge the Committee to gather data on how the law is implemented.

Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility is the statewide affiliate of Physicians for Social Responsibility. With our 880 supporters, our mission is to address the greatest public health threats of all: nuclear war and climate change, but we are also committed locally to addressing environmental injustice, health disparities and the social determinants of health which include housing. [Housing is health!](#) Evictions and homelessness represent the worst outcome of housing insecurity, which all includes high housing costs in proportion to income, poor housing quality, unstable neighborhood, and overcrowding. Allowing a renter who is caught in a scam to be evicted without ability to distinguish that they are a victim and not a true squatter turns justice on its head. The impact on children's [physical and mental health](#) is especially troubling including worse parent-rated child health, lower lead testing rates, lower weight, adverse perinatal outcomes, and higher neurodevelopmental risk. Another example is the long term [mental health harms](#) for young adults exposed to eviction.

We understand that law enforcement already has [tools](#) to address alleged squatting and the fake landlords who offer fraudulent leases. Squatting is already a [crime](#) in Maryland under trespass or burglary. Offering a fraudulent lease is already a crime in Maryland. The General Assembly should take further action to hold accountable social media companies that enable fake landlord fraud.

Second the criminal provisions of HB 847 are too broad and vague. First, it criminalizes the “possession” or “claiming a right to possess” residential property, which could include the occupant-victim of a scam operation in which the tenant usually finds a property online, pays the person who claims to be the “landlord” thousands of dollars in first month’s rent and security deposit, receives the keys, and then finds out weeks or months later that the purported “landlord” was never authorized to rent out the property. These families are victims of fraud and should not be criminalized.

Third, HB 847 will allow owners to bypass any court in seeking an eviction and go straight to Sheriff, in violation of the constitutional right to due process for Maryland renters and other legal residents. This will allow unlicensed landlords and property flippers to [evict renting families like Madison Pleas and her young family](#) without a fair hearing merely by calling them “squatters” when they are not.

The General Assembly passed legislation resolving this issue just last year. In response to concerns about alleged squatting, the General Assembly passed SB 46 in 2025 to expedite “wrongful detainer” cases. Effective October 1, 2025, the bill requires the court to hear any wrongful detainer claim within 10 days, making it one of the fastest judicial processes in the State. Residents accused of squatting receive minimum notice, have little opportunity to seek legal counsel, and have a very limited time to prepare a defense.

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Claims of a widespread squatting epidemic are not supported by [evidence](#). Despite this, special interest groups like Sinclair-aligned media (Fox45, Balt. Sun, WJLA) and the American Legislative Exchange Council, have [manufactured a narrative](#) that lawlessness and squatting are rampant, using it to justify policies that strip residents of their constitutional rights and push “evict-first/questions later” bills — [even fueling the Trump Administration’s call for National Guard deployments](#) in cities like D.C., Chicago, Portland, and Los Angeles.

Weaponizing the “squatter” label to pass “Evict First, Ask Questions Later” laws that strip down judicial oversight over evictions will benefit property flippers, unlicensed landlords, and other bad actors, and [harm the most vulnerable Marylanders](#). Claiming a rightful occupant is a “squatter” is also used as a tool for personal revenge. Survivors of domestic abuse and their children are particularly at risk, as well as differently abled people. No matter the context of the allegation, [Black women, who are already disproportionately affected by eviction](#), will suffer most under an evict-first approach.

Evict-first laws in other states demonstrate the real-world dangers of stripping due process. In Florida, a [family in Pensacola was evicted with only 15 minutes’ notice under new legislation pushed by Governor Ron DeSantis](#). The sheriff acted on a fraudulent owner’s claim, evicting senior residents and allowing the sale of their belongings.

The real crisis in Maryland is not “squatting,” but a [shortage of 275,000 affordable rental](#)

units and the lack of basic tenant protections like good cause eviction. Maryland policymakers should focus on solutions that stabilize families: strengthening fair housing laws, expanding eviction prevention funds, supporting good cause eviction, and creating zoning and administrative policies that spur housing production.

The “Housing First” agenda demonstrates that keeping people in their homes is both humane and effective, whereas ideological evict-first/ask questions later policies put families at risk. **We urge policymakers to stand with renting families, uphold their constitutional right to allow both sides to be heard before any eviction, and reject the politics of fear.**

Chesapeake PSR strongly opposes HB 847 and urges an **unfavorable report.**

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