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Hearing — Strengthening Renters' Safety Act**

The Public Justice Center is non-profit organization that provides legal representation to tenants to assert their rights to safe, habitable, affordable, and non-discriminatory housing. I urge the City Council to vote in favor of the Strengthening Renters' Safety Act.

Through my work, I meet new tenants every week who are living amid horrible conditions of disrepair. Rainwater flooding into their home up to their ankles. Ceilings caving in. Rats scurrying through the kitchen. Mold growth exacerbating a child's asthma. These are just a few of the numerous issues the tenants I represent are constantly dealing with in their homes.

The purpose of the Baltimore City licensing law, Baltimore City Code Article 13 § 5, is to hold landlords to a basic regulatory standard, to ensure that all tenants in Baltimore City have safe housing that does not threaten their life, health, and safety. However, various obstacles are preventing this goal from being achieved, which the Strengthening Renters' Safety Act helps to address.

First, DHCD is issuing licenses despite clear non-compliance with the licensing law. In my work as a tenant attorney, I have encountered licenses issued for properties where there are active vacant building notices at the time the inspection occurred and the license was issued. I have seen a license issued when a blank piece of paper was submitted as an inspection report, and where a lead certificate was not uploaded at all. DHCD has backdated licenses to months or even years prior to the date of the inspection, which is expressly prohibited by the licensing law. The Public Justice Center has documented eighteen instances of clearly improper licenses being issued, largely due to oversight errors and errors with DHCD's computer system. For every instance we have identified, there could be dozens more that go unaddressed, leaving tenants to live in terrible conditions without the protections they need.

Second, even when the license application is not clearly deficient, the third party inspector system as it currently stands has proven unreliable. This is because there is an inherent conflict of interest when landlords can choose their own inspectors. Inspectors want to maintain a business relationship with the landlord who hired them, so they pass properties that should not be passed. I have seen properties that passed a third party inspection where the tenants were dealing with serious conditions issues at the time it passed. I have also seen properties that passed the third party inspection, but a city inspector issued code violations less than a month later, with no change in the conditions during that time. DHCD under-utilizes its power to audit third party inspections, and it has no formal complaint process when the tenant believes the third party inspector fraudulently passed the property.

The SRSA would help address these issues by establishing an oversight taskforce and a formal complaint process for tenants living in properties where improper licenses were issued, which would be a critical step in ensuring the effective, continued implementation of the licensing law. It would also increase city inspections in the worst properties and create more transparency for tenants to better understand their rights.

For these reasons, I urge the City Council to vote in favor of the Strengthening Renters' Safety Act.