

Ethan Hasiuk
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Re: 21-0079R Informational Hearing- Mold in Housing

Dear Councilmember McCray & Members of the Health, Environment, and Technology Committee,

Thank you to Chair McCray and the Health, Environment, and Technology Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Ethan Hasiuk. I live in Charles Village in District 12, and I am testifying on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ). JUFJ organizes more than 1,600 people in Baltimore City to support social, racial, and economic justice. Renters rights are a focus area for JUFJ and we are a member organization of the Baltimore Renters United coalition – the human need for housing has been central to Jewish thought since the beginning of Jewish history.

I have been a renter in Baltimore City for the three and a half years that I have lived here. There is so little accountability for landlords in this City– whether related to mold or other habitability issues– and therefore the standard of what is habitable is effectively set by individual landlords. Last year, the ceiling in my apartment caved in due to years of water damage – a large chunk of plaster crashed down in my bedroom. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

This episode was not the only unaddressed habitability issue in the unit. As winter arrived, I realized that the heat did not work at all in half of my apartment (including my bedroom), and the landlord did not send a plumber to fix the radiator until weeks later when I threatened to file for rent escrow, an action I only knew to take because I was able to consult a lawyer.

I knew even less about how to address the issue with the ceiling. It was only *after* the collapse that I learned that I could have called in the building inspector via 311, which could have possibly obligated the landlord to make the fix or face a fine. Overall, I believe that the City does not do enough to inform renters of their rights, especially when it comes to remedying habitability issues like mold or water damage. After all, if I, a college-educated person who has done organizing for renters' rights, does not know these remedies, who does?

Furthermore, when advocating for fixes for these habitability issues, I was mindful of the possibility of retaliation by my landlord. The landlord was constantly rude and condescending, and I worried that if I made too much fuss, they might choose not to renew my lease. This is why I believe that it is important to extend and strengthen the City's Just Cause lease renewal ordinance and pass HB 881 in the General Assembly this session.

Finally, I know that the water damage in my apartment accumulated over years, and heard stories of mold, collapsed ceilings and other uninhabitable conditions in my landlord's other properties. The water

damage should have been addressed in the rental inspection, but it was not. I believe that the rental licensing law should be strengthened accordingly. Mold can have serious, negative health impacts and should be a factor in determining whether a place is safe for people to live.

I encourage the committee and the City Council to collaborate with Baltimore Renters United to develop stronger accountability for landlords and remedies for mold and habitability issues that are accessible and workable for all tenants. Most tenants do not have the resources for a lawyer or the time to represent themselves in court, and there should be a fix for all habitability issues that does not require going to court and holds landlords accountable

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Ethan Hasiuk
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District 12