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Public Justice Center (PJC) and Baltimore Renters United (BRU) would like to thank Baltimore City Council and the Ways and Means Committee for allowing tenants and advocates to be heard on the very important subject of rental licensing. Ensuring that tenants have safe and humane places to live is an important part of any city's infrastructure and Baltimore's requirement that rental properties be licensed is an important part of making sure these goals are met.

We believe that the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has been instrumental in ensuring that properties are licensed, and we understand that they are in a season of transition. Nonetheless, we do believe that there are issues that need to be addressed so that the City can hold bad acting and/or negligent landlords accountable for not following the law and allow tenants an easier way to report landlords that have not followed the law.

At PJC, we see clients who live in licensed properties that still have DHCD violations that threaten their health. There are some clients who live in licensed properties that are in such bad shape no objective person, much less an inspector, would have passed the property. In many cases tenants suffer because they do not know how to report these issues to DHCD that the property, while licensed, is unsafe. Nor do they know how to follow along the process when DHCD does, in fact, begin the revocation process of the property.

In partnership, we believe that there are some very sensible and reasonable fixes that the City could implement to make sure that we are adequately addressing these licensing issues.

Create a Randomized Generator of Inspectors

The current system for a landlord to hire an inspector and to pass their property has left far too many gaps for bad acting landlords to pass their inspection despite their property being unsafe. A big reason is that, currently, the landlord can choose their own inspector to pass their property. To strengthen inspector neutrality each landlord should be assigned 3 inspectors at random by DHCD where they can choose 1 of those choices to inspect their property.

Fund DHCD

Provide more funding for DHCD to train and hire inspectors. In addition, provide DHCD funding in order to create infrastructures for the public to report bad acting landlords as well as find information on revoked licenses and investigations.

Present Added Transparency to the Public

Article 13 § 5-22 requires DHCD to make freely available to the public the status of any rental dwelling; violation notices, orders, or citations; and notices of denials, suspensions, or revocation of the rental property license. While DHCD is currently working on their website to provide this information to the public, oftentimes they are inaccurate and/or do not show the full picture of the licensing status of the property.

Moreover, a bigger issue is that there is no clarity or policy or procedure from DHCD on when a property's license is in the process of being revoked. This clarity needs to change.

We believe these changes are sensible, manageable, and would have an incredible impact on healthy and safe housing in the City of Baltimore.

Public Justice Center is a member of Baltimore Renters United coalition and thanks the Committee for allowing them to submit testimony. If you have any questions, please contact Albert Turner, Esq., turnera@publicjustice.org (410) 625-9409 Ext. 250.