

March 25, 2024

Eric Lewitus

Ednor Gardens, Baltimore City

TESTIMONY ON 23-0357- Position: Favorable
Baltimore City - Strengthening Renters' Safety Act

TO: Chair Sharon Green Middleton, Vice Chair John Bullock, and the Economic and Community Development Committee

FROM: Eric Lewitus

My name is Eric Lewitus and I am a resident of District 14. I am submitting this testimony in support of 23-0357 - Baltimore City - Strengthening Renters' Safety Act on behalf of Jews United for Justice, which organizes more than 1,600 people in Baltimore City to support social, racial, and economic justice campaigns

I am a Senior Scientist in infectious disease research at a government institute, and so I understand well how the effects of our environment affect public and personal health outcomes. I am testifying in support of this bill, which will define the powers of the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) towards codifying landlords' responsibilities and ensuring rented properties are safe for renters. The rights accorded renters in this bill – including knowledge of landlord licensure – are embarrassingly and dangerously lacking for current Baltimore renters.

Living in safe housing is a necessary condition for the health of Baltimore residents. Housing instability is associated with respiratory problems, hypertension, arthritis, depression, and adverse mental health outcomes. Effects on children are particularly grievous. Housing insecurity negatively affects physical development and exacerbates behavioral problems, both of which are often reversed with government oversight of rented properties. Rental property oversight is a public health and safety issue with evidence to endorse its implementation.

As a tenant for nearly two decades, I directly experienced the failure of a city to assure my safety as a renter. I have been forced to pay for the decaying infrastructure a landlord declined to fix, forced to share a bathroom with slugs a landlord declined to treat, and forced to live without heat for two years that a landlord declined to provide. I say forced because the options available to renters are limited; and without government oversight of rental properties, the only recourse renters are left with is to live in an unsafe, inhospitable environment.

The most heartening benefit of renters' safety undoubtedly comes in the form of children and adults having the opportunity to live with dignity. But taken together, rental property oversight is a budget savings coup: physical and mental health directly and indirectly take a toll on public services and the local economy. Investment in renters' safety unburdens hospitals, schools, and policing, while giving more people access to stable employment. According to available DHCD data, service requests have increased 10% every year since 2019; and 25% (up to 40% in district 9) of violation notices or work orders are routinely left outstanding. By protecting renters' safety, the DHCD could avoid the costs of multiplying service requests necessitated through unsafe housing and delinquent oversight.

We do want to ensure that tenants are protected from warrantless search and seizure and urge the committee to examine §5-10 PRIORITY INSPECTIONS to ensure inspections must only be concerned with the condition of the dwelling and not how the renter is occupying the rented space.

On behalf of JUFJ, I implore the Economic and Community Development Committee to pass the Strengthening Renters' Safety Act and engage in further conversation with advocates to ensure tenants are protected from unreasonable search and seizure.