



Attorney General, Legislators and Advocates Call for Enactment of Housing Justice Package

Legislation Aims to Address Ongoing Housing and Eviction Crises

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Contact: Matt Losak, 301-588-3987
Zafar Shah, 410-429-0765

Maryland—Attorney General Brian Frosh joined key legislators and advocates at a press conference Monday morning to propose a “Housing Justice Package” of legislation aimed at addressing the ongoing housing and eviction crisis faced by more than 200,000 Maryland households. The press conference was hosted by Renters United Maryland (RUM), a coalition of more than 30 leading housing advocacy organizations.

“Keeping Marylanders in their homes, ensuring they have access to the tools to protect them from foreclosure or eviction, is a complicated problem that deserves a robust, multi-pronged approach,” said Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh. “Each of the reforms announced today is critical to addressing the longstanding structural deficits and inequities that prevent full and meaningful access to housing.”

Proposed legislation expands emergency protections for renters, including provisions that close the lease termination loophole in Governor Larry Hogan’s Executive Order on evictions and the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) order set to expire New Year’s Eve. The Housing Justice Package also proposes emergency eviction and foreclosure prevention measures, and an overhaul of a Rent Court process which currently heavily favors landlords.

"For 9 months, staying secure in our homes has been our protection against a deadly virus, said Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins (D-20, Montgomery County). “Now, hundreds of thousands of Marylanders are at risk of losing this protection. Unprecedented times call for bold action to keep families housed during this pandemic and beyond. "

The COVID-19 Eviction Relief Act, sponsored by Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins and Senator Will Smith would ban rent increases and late fees until April 2022, ensure renters are made aware of their rights and resources available to assist them, establishes a state rental assistance fund and

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overhauls the eviction process by introducing a statewide right to legal representation, creating an Eviction Diversion Program in the district courts, and requiring landlords to utilize rental assistance and mediation before resorting to eviction. Robust homeowner protections are also featured in this set of legislative priorities. A summary of the bills is available at www.Thepressconference.com. The press conference was streamed live on Facebook and will be available on YouTube.

"Vulnerable tenants appearing before court have always had an inequitable playing field and the pandemic has shined a light on these disparities," said Senator Shelly Hettleman, (D-11, Baltimore County). "Providing legal representation will help to prevent evictions for these vulnerable tenants, as well as keep them and the community safe in the middle of this public health crisis."

"No Marylander should be forced to skip prescriptions and meals to avoid being tossed out into the street during a pandemic," said Delegate Vaughn Stewart (D-19, Montgomery County) "But that's exactly what thousands of homeowners might face when forbearance relief expires this spring," said Delegate Vaughn Stewart. "The General Assembly can prevent this mass suffering, and has a moral obligation to do so."

"We are not asking the landlords to give up their rights, we are just asking for a fair fight," said Delegate Melissa Wells (D-40, Baltimore City) "Facing an eviction crisis, we must do all we can to ensure every tenant has access to a fair hearing and equitable due process."

"Without the passage of this legislation by the Maryland General Assembly during the upcoming legislative session, renters and homeowners across Maryland will be at even greater risk of losing their homes and be put at higher risk for exposure to COVID-19," said RUM. "RUM and our state legislative allies call for passage of the Housing Justice Package during the 2021 Legislative Session to address the emergency needs of renters and homeowners during the pandemic, and to address longstanding inequities of rent court, and between renters and landlords generally."

Renter United Maryland (RUM) was co-founded in 2017 by the Public Justice Center, the Montgomery County Renters Alliance, Jews United for Justice and Communities United. The RUM coalition includes more than 30 nonprofit, legal, labor, civic and religion-based organizations dedicated to advancing renters' rights and protections in the state legislature, and defending against legislation hostile to rental housing stability, quality and affordability.

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