

Testimony for Montgomery County Council Expedited Bill 30-21

Position: In Favor

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Individual Testimony

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1:30 PM

My name is Brandy Brooks, and I am a renter and organizer from Kensington-Wheaton. I also serve as a board member of the Montgomery County Renter's Alliance. I am writing today to offer my strong support for Montgomery County Council Expedited Bill 30-21, "*Extended Limitations Against Rent Increases and Late Fees*".

While not the rent freeze that was originally proposed at the onset of this pandemic by Councilmember Will Jawando, Bill 30-21E is a reasonable measure that continues the protection the Council approved last year for renters in our county. By limiting rent increases to the voluntary rent guideline of 1.4%, the Council will help thousands of county residents stay in their homes rather than facing housing insecurity and homelessness.

We know that this pandemic has not only been a health crisis, but also an economic one. We know that many people who lost their jobs remain unemployed, and that both the expiration of enhanced unemployment payments and the severe delays in the state's unemployment system have had a devastating impact on the ability of residents to meet their basic needs. We know that delays in rent relief have only made it harder for people to recover from these economic impacts and stay in their homes.

We also know that housing insecurity and homelessness lead to additional crises for residents and for the county, at a time when many county systems are struggling to handle the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. Housing insecurity makes it more difficult for people to hold down jobs or obtain new employment, reducing the county's tax revenue and increasing demand on public services. Housing insecurity and homelessness deeply interfere with the ability of students to learn, adding challenges to an already fraught return to in-person learning. Housing insecurity and homelessness also increases the likelihood of further transmission of the deadly Delta variant and other future variants of COVID-19, as overcrowded and unstable housing conditions reduce the ability of households to socially distance or quarantine in order to protect themselves and others.

The County Council's own Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) Racial Equity and Social Justice (RESJ) statement stressed the overwhelmingly positive impact of this bill for communities of color, finding that "*Black and Latinx residents are over-represented among rent-burdened families and households in need of rental assistance to avoid evictions. Black individuals and families are also overrepresented among persons experiencing homelessness in the County.*" OLO further found that Bill 30-21E already aligns with the best practices to prevent eviction noted Eviction Lab at Princeton, the Urban Institute, and PolicyLink. I urge members of

the Council to give great weight to the impacts of their vote in light of our current public health and economic crisis and our County's stated commitment to racial equity and social justice.

No one advocating for this bill is arguing that landlords have not also experienced significant economic impacts during this time. But the plain fact is that the severity of those impacts is drastically different for property owners, who have greater economic resources with which to weather these difficulties. The limitations on rent increases and late fees in Bill 30-21 avoid placing greater economic stress on residents who are already struggling and prevent the creation of additional barriers for residents who are working hard to pay their current rent or address past arrears - thus making it *more* likely that landlords will be able to collect rent from their tenants. If the County Council does not vote to maintain this rent cap, the immediate and unavoidable impact will not be to increase revenue to landlords; it will be to push struggling and desperate renters out of their homes and out of our communities.

The crisis of keeping families housed has never been more acute in our lifetimes. Large increases in rent and compounding late fees will only further burden working families and push more towards housing instability and ultimately eviction. I urge the County Council to take all available steps to keep working families in their homes and to pass Expedited Bill 30-21 without amendment and without delay.