

September 14, 2021
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<https://jufj.org/>



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF BILL 30-21
**Landlord-Tenant Relations – Restrictions During Emergencies – Extended
Limitations Against Rent Increases and Late Fees**

TO: The Montgomery County Council

FROM: Sherry Glazer and Deedee Jacobsohn, on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ)

Our names are Deedee Jacobsohn and Sherry Glazer, both residents of District I. We are submitting this testimony in support of **Expedited Bill 30-21 – Landlord-Tenant Relations – Restrictions During Emergencies – Extended Limitations Against Rent Increases and Late Fees** on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ). JUFJ represents over 2,700 Jews and allies from across Montgomery County, who act on our shared Jewish values by pursuing social and economic justice and racial equity in our local communities.

Jewish texts provide guidance on many aspects of fairness in housing. For example, the Talmud includes specific discussions on the requirement to provide safe and habitable living conditions to tenants and on limiting evictions. In this time of crisis we are thinking of a more general ethical precept: “You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger” (Deuteronomy 23:24). **Bill 30-21 provides critical protections to tenants during a prolonged period of economic uncertainty the pandemic has caused.**

Bill 30-21 extends the provisions of the COVID-19 Renter Relief Act (Expedited Bill 18-20) which was enacted by the full Council on April 23, 2020. Bill 18-20 prohibited landlords from raising rents above the voluntary rent increase guidelines from the beginning of the state of emergency in March 2020 through 90 days after the expiration of the state of emergency. By passing Bill 30-21, tenants will be protected from rent increases for an entire year after the expiration of the emergency, instead of being protected for only 90 days.

Bill 30-21 will also prohibit charging fees for late rent payments during the emergency and for one year after the expiration of the emergency. **Since the emergency declared by the State of Maryland expired on August 15, time is of the essence for enacting Bill**

30-21 in its entirety, ensuring protections for renters from unjustly large rent increases and accumulating late fees.

We are nearly 18 months into the health crisis that began in March 2020, and the pandemic is not over. Despite the recent surge of the delta variant and urgent pleas from Maryland legislators and advocates, Governor Hogan would not renew Maryland's state of emergency and allowed it to expire on August 15, 2021. This means the protections from the COVID-19 Renter Relief Act will expire on November 15, 2021. Bill 30-21 will provide an additional 9 months of protection from excessive rent increases that will significantly lessen the hardships on renters. Despite millions of federal and state dollars granted for rent relief, tenants are struggling to get access to the funds to cover past rent due. We urge the County Council to do what it can to ease the financial burdens and uncertainty facing renters in Montgomery County, particularly as other safety nets disappear.

Limiting rent increases to those specified in the voluntary rent guidelines does not result in preventing all rent increases, only those increases that are unfair during a time of economic crisis. According to the Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA), the voluntary rent guidelines are set by the County Executive annually "based on the rental component of the Consumer Price Index for the Washington-Metropolitan Area." This keeps rent in line with other regular expenses and allows tenants to have a reasonable expectation of remaining in their homes at a rent they can afford. Since most landlords tend to follow the voluntary rent guidelines without legislation, extending this limitation will have no impact on their usual business. Landlords who seek to profit from the perennial local housing shortage, however, will be prevented from doing so. We are thankful that the County Council voted unanimously to pass limits on rent increases in April 2020, and hope that you will extend that provision now.

We further urge the County Council to prohibit charging late fees. Late fees during the current crisis place an undue burden on struggling workers, especially cost burdened renters who already pay more than 35% of their incomes towards rent. And if late fees are allowed to continue to accrue, the amount of rent relief obtained will not cover rising debt. **We hope that the County Council will prohibit the punitive practice of charging late fees at a time when thousands of renters are at risk of eviction during an ongoing public health crisis.**

On behalf of Jews United for Justice, we urge the Council to use its power to keep people housed by supporting Bill 30-21.