

Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania
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Testimony before the House Urban Affairs Committee

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Ben Laudermilch of the Redevelopment Authority of Cumberland County and I'm here today representing the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania. With me is Liz Hersh, executive director of the Housing Alliance.

The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania is a statewide nonprofit organization whose members collectively own and/or manage more than 45,000 rental homes, provide services to some 400,000 people each year and employ about 10,000 full time people. We are developers, owners and managers; lawyers and bankers; homeless service providers, housing and redevelopment authorities, community development corporations, and local government officials working together for a home within reach of every Pennsylvanian, especially those with low incomes.

We are also an organization built on values. We believe that if you work hard and play by the rules, you ought to be able to afford a decent place to live. If you are a senior or person with a disability or a veteran who has served, you ought to be able to live safely and with dignity. We believe that no child should be homeless.

Like the members of this committee, the Housing Alliance is committed to a strong, viable rental market that provides an adequate supply of homes that are high quality, affordable and available. We are also committed to working with the committee and committee staff on addressing the difficult and pressing problems that face our communities and our housing market. As many of you are aware, we have done extensive research on solutions to blighted property and worked to support the General Assembly in finding sustainable solutions to housing, homelessness and blight problems.

We have learned valuable lessons working on blighted property issues. Our goal of protecting the most vulnerable while balancing the interests of property owners takes time and requires the consideration of diverse viewpoints. This process requires an honest approach to solving difficult problems that sometimes cannot be easily resolved.

House Bill 1714 focuses on the timely removal of tenant property once it is clear the tenant will no longer live in the rental property. The issue here is obvious: Landlords and property owners are seeking a timely and cost effective way to get the property back online. Tenant advocates want to ensure that tenants have protection and recourse in instances of abuse. We believe there is a path to a solution to this difficult issue, one that would benefit tenants and landlords, as well as the overall rental market, and we are therefore generally open to the intent of this bill.

Liz can share her previous experience as the executive director of the Tenants' Action Group working with 25,000 tenants a year while providing rental subsidies to about 1400 landlords. She will tell you that the single biggest problem they faced – surprisingly – was that most landlords were too nice! They waited too long to start eviction proceedings and tried too hard to accommodate people.

However, there were true problem owners and managers that took advantage of vulnerable tenants, including:

- The woman whose landlord was demanding sex or he would evict her and her children;
- The seniors living on the top floors of a high rise where the owner wanted to sell the building quickly and didn't repair the broken elevator;
- The mother living in an apartment with plumbing problems so severe that every time they flushed the toilet waste flooded the home;
- The building where the owner allowed garbage to accumulate in the back hallways with no dumpsters or trash cans despite complaints, while code enforcement took months.

In these cases unscrupulous owners use the removal of property to intimidate. Yes, fortunately they are the outliers. But one purpose of our legal system is to protect vulnerable people and communities in situations where there is abuse. It is for these reasons that we feel that there must continue to be independent third party verification of notice of intent to remove tenant property and an opportunity for the tenant to respond to the third party.

Over the past several weeks leaders of the Housing Alliance, including several rental property owners and managers like me, have worked through this important issue internally and with committee staff. We understand and appreciate the intent of House Bill 1714 and recognize the hard work – particularly by committee and legal staff – that went into drafting and working through this legislation.

We propose exploring a way to make disposal of property faster, easier and cheaper while retaining third party verification of notice. Perhaps some kind of expedited administrative verification could efficiently and cost-effectively be adopted - just as we do with parking tickets, for example. We hope you will consider exploring this option.

As an organization of rental property owners and managers, we appreciate the problem of tenants leaving their belongings behind with no intention of returning and no communication. It is costly and time consuming. Property owners need to be able to clear out, clean up and re-rent the unit as quickly as possible. This helps keep costs down and units available.

We are also an organization that protects tenants. The rights of tenants and property owners are important issues – the Housing Alliance wants to prevent distrust between all parties. House Bill 1714 strives to resolve this important issue. We are hopeful that as we continue this dialogue that a third party verification system continues to be a consideration of the committee so we can implement a solution that is responsive to all stakeholders.

Thank you for your time today and we look forward to working with you to address these complex but important issues.