

Councilmember Ryan Dorsey To Introduce Landmark Housing Legislation Banning Source of Income Discrimination

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City Housing Advocates Applaud the Move to Ensure Equal Treatment for Renters across Baltimore

BALTIMORE – This evening, Councilmember Ryan Dorsey, will introduce CB # 18-0308 “Community Relations – Housing Discrimination – Source of Income” before the Baltimore City Council.

CB #18-0308 will protect Baltimore City renters by prohibiting discrimination in housing based on source of income. “Source of Income” is described in the bill as any lawful source of income from employment and government or private assistance, as well as alimony, child support, inheritance or gifts. Although landlords and property managers of some developments are already prohibited from discriminating against prospective tenants based on their source of income under Baltimore’s 2007 Inclusionary Housing law, the newly introduced legislation would expand that protection to tenants across the city.

Most commonly, source of income discrimination occurs when a landlord refuses to accept tenants using the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program. HCV’s are primarily used by African American and female-headed households, elderly persons, and people with disabilities, including veterans. Most voucher holders wait years to receive the housing subsidy and try for months to locate a landlord willing to accept it. The limited number of landlords willing to accept vouchers contributes to concentrations of poverty and even homelessness. The 2017 Baltimore City Mayoral Workgroup on Homelessness recommended enacting legislation to prohibit discrimination based on source of income. A 2012 report on fair housing in the Baltimore region recommended that source of income discrimination legislation be enacted to help combat deeply entrenched racial segregation throughout the region.

Tisha Guthrie, a fitness professional, licensed social worker, and health equity advocate, experienced many of the challenges voucher holders face finding housing in the City. Due to chronic medical needs, Ms. Guthrie sought a voucher to enable her to afford rent when she is unable to work. After waiting 7 years for her voucher, “my initial excitement quickly turned to frustration when I couldn’t find a landlord willing to accept my voucher,” she said. Required to use the voucher within 60 days, “I was forced to file for multiple extensions. I presented pages of contacts documenting my efforts to secure housing. And what was truly ironic was the plethora of ‘specials’ being offered, clearly indicated the need to occupy vacant units. The very people who graciously provided me information and accompanied me on full tours of their complexes, even emailing me reminders of our appointments, were the very ones now punitively closing their doors. No explanation was offered.” Ms. Guthrie reports “although I was able to

finally find a landlord to accept my voucher, it is not in a building in which I want to live, but I have nowhere else to go.”

National momentum around source of income protection is strong. Earlier this month, Senators Tim Kaine and Orrin Hatch introduced legislation adding Source of Income protection to the federal Fair Housing Act. In 2017, the American Bar Association adopted policy urging governments to prohibit the practice. Thirteen states and over 72 local jurisdictions, including 3 Maryland Counties and 2 Maryland cities already prohibit discrimination based on source of income in most properties, but Baltimore City only prohibits the practice in properties covered by the City’s Inclusionary Housing Law. CB #18-0308 will prohibit Source of Income discrimination in nearly all City properties.

Many landlords and property managers in Baltimore City refuse to accept HCVs or otherwise discriminate based on other forms of lawful source of income. A simple search of Craig’s List reveals “No Section 8” listings in abundance in Baltimore City. “If tenants have the income to pay for housing and are otherwise qualified to rent, there is no reason why they should be rejected,” said Antonia Fasanelli, Executive Director of the Homeless Persons Representation Project. “This form of discrimination is insidious -- it hurts veterans, families trying to get on their feet, persons with disabilities, and elderly persons, it contributes to and exacerbates homelessness and it is time for the City of Baltimore to stop this practice.”

This bill does not prevent landlords from screening tenants based on any other criteria permitted by law, such as rental history or criminal background. Owner-occupied housing units are exempt from the City’s fair housing law.

Councilmember Dorsey, the sponsor of the legislation, says “through the introduction and passage of Council Bill #18-0308 we can continue the fight to undo Baltimore’s legacy of exclusionary and discriminatory housing practices by ensuring that no Baltimore City resident will be denied housing based solely on their lawful source of their income. Whether their income comes from employment, a housing voucher, veterans’ benefits or retirement income, the denial of housing based on lawful source of income is unconscionable. By passing Council Bill #18-0308 we can ensure that all Baltimoreans are able to live in the neighborhood they choose, regardless of the source of their income.”

CB#18-308 will be introduced this evening. Councilman John Bullock, Chair of the Housing and Urban Affair Committee is expected to announce a hearing date during this evening’s Council Meeting.

The following organizations support the passage of CB#18-0308:

ACLU of Maryland
Baltimore Chapter, NAACP
Baltimore Regional Housing Partnership
BRIDGE Maryland, Inc.
Disability Rights Maryland
Health Care for the Homeless
Homeless Persons Representation Project
Public Justice Center