

Written Testimony – HB93 11/11/2024

Chairwoman Sandra O'Brien, Vice Chair Theresa Gavarone, Ranking Member William DeMora, and Committee Members Stephanie Kunze and Nathan Manning, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony, and for your time and attention to it. Moreover, I offer gratitude for your service to our state. Only those who have been public servants truly understand what it means to live a life of public service: the early mornings and late evenings; the way public matters intrude on one's weekends, holidays, vacations, and sleep; the family events missed while attending to public duties. Again, sincere thanks.

My name is Cathleen Billig. My husband and I own 27 units of rental property in Stark County. We are teachers, and our rental property business is aimed at supplementing our retirement, or funding it if STRS proves incapable of sustaining itself. We've been housing providers for six years. We carry mortgages on all properties but one. Over the course of these six years, we have encountered a variety of tenants. Some treat the properties well and pay their rent and utilities on time. Others do not. Nearly every month we receive some kind of notice that a tenant has not paid several utility bills in a row, or has not paid rent, or both. We receive notices that the gas or electric service will be terminated unless payment is made by a certain date. The gas and electric companies are clearly not in the business of providing free utilities any more than we are in the business of providing free housing and free water. And yet, when a tenant accrues an enormous unpaid water bill, the water company does not shut off the water. Tenants have gone months or even over a year with an unpaid water bill, and when they move out, we are responsible for settling the account so that the new tenant can receive water service. Just last month, a tenant left a property with over \$4000 in clearly intentional damage, a sanitation bill of over \$400, and over \$400 in unpaid water bills, along with unpaid rent. We must cover these expenses in order to make the property rentable, and so we do. But isn't an unpaid water bill tantamount to theft? Why are tenants permitted, again and again, to steal water? If the water bill followed them, as the gas and electric bills do, such theft would be far less likely to occur.

Every year we pay hundreds of dollars for other people's water utility bills. Some years, we pay well over a thousand dollars in water utility bills. Some of the unpaid water bills obviously show normal usage, but others clearly reflect extravagance, sometimes for months at a time for a single property. If a tenant were responsible for that water bill, that tenant would be more likely to use a reasonable amount of water.

On occasion, when a tenant moves out, as an expression of displeasure he or she will leave the water running, perhaps both inside and outside the house, purposefully clogging a drain, thereby causing flooding and doing considerable damage across multiple levels of the structure, sometimes in another tenant's living space. The water can run for days before the damage is discovered. If tenants were tied to their own water bills, this situation would be far less likely.

Since we must cover these water bills, we must raise rent accordingly. But raising rent for all means that responsible tenants pay the bills of the irresponsible. The gas and electric bills already follow the tenants when they move. Surely it would not be overly difficult to set up a system in which each tenant is responsible for his or her own water bill. You and I – and most people – pay our own bills. Why shouldn't everyone be responsible for paying for the water that they use?