Testimony of Te-Sha Lee
Before the Ohio Senate Local Government Committee
Hearing on "Limiting Liens for Unpaid Utility Bills"
March 10th, 2026

Good Morning Chairperson O'Brien, Vice-Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Te-Sha Lee, and I am a small housing provider and community developer in Columbus, Ohio. I own and manage properties in Brittany Hills, Winding Hills and neighborhoods in the North and East Columbus areas — neighborhoods I've lived in for most of my life.

My mission is to create safe, dignified, and affordable housing for working families, single parents, and individuals transitioning from homelessness. This work is deeply personal to me. I once received public assistance and held a Section 8 voucher for eight years — support that helped me raise my children and achieve stability. Today, I take great pride in giving back by providing the same kind of housing that once gave me hope.

Current water-utility and assessment laws unfairly penalize housing providers for charges we did not create and cannot control.

In two cases, tenants vacated my properties leaving behind large unpaid water and sewer bills, which were later added as special assessments on my property taxes—even though the accounts were in their names.

In one instance, a tenant unplugged her washer and left the water running when she moved out. This resulted in a bill exceeding $1,000. I wasn't notified until it was too late and later found out that the charges had already been certified to my tax bill.

These costs don't come out of corporate reserves; they come directly off my kitchen table. Each unexpected expense forces me to choose between paying my household bills or covering someone else's debt.

I can't continue to provide housing for others if I can't afford to feed my own children.

Recovering these funds is often more expensive than the loss itself. To seek repayment, I'd have to hire an attorney and file a civil suit, while the tenant can simply move, open a new account, and repeat the cycle with no consequence.

This is not just a financial hardship — it's a systemic lack of accountability that punishes those trying to provide affordable housing and rewards irresponsible behavior.

Small housing providers are already stretched thin by rising insurance, taxes, and maintenance costs. Each new assessment erodes our ability to keep rents stable, make repairs, or invest in improvements.

When property owners are forced to absorb tenant-caused utility debt, it discourages participation in affordable housing programs and drives out the very providers most committed to community well-being. These policies don't just harm small businesses — they shrink the affordable-housing supply in neighborhoods like mine.

My purpose in this work is impact, not profit.
I've completed both the Emerging Developers Accelerator Program (EDAP) and the Urban Land Institute's REDI Program to better serve my community and help build equitable, sustainable housing opportunities.

I take pride in maintaining homes that are safe, affordable, and stigma-free. I want residents to feel valued — not defined by their circumstances. But when legislation creates barriers like these, it undermines those of us who are working to "do well by doing good."

We need common-sense reform that protects both landlords and tenants by:

1. Billing water and sewer directly to the user, not the property owner.
2. Prohibiting automatic tax assessments for unpaid tenant utilities.
3. Establishing accountability measures for tenants who default on utility payments.
4. Creating an appeal process before any unpaid charges are certified to property taxes.

This is not about shifting blame — it's about fair and shared responsibility.

I'm not a large developer or corporate investor. I'm a mother, community advocate, and small business owner working to strengthen the neighborhoods I grew up in.

I want to keep providing homes for families who need them most, but I can't do that if I'm forced to pay for debts I didn't create.
Passing SB118 will allow local owners like me to keep housing affordable, reinvest in our communities, and build stronger neighborhoods for everyone.

Thank you for your time, for hearing my story, and for supporting reforms that help small housing providers continue to build up — not give up — our communities.

I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.