

**KC TENANTS BILL OF RIGHTS**  
TESTIMONIES FROM HOUSING COMMITTEE  
NOVEMBER 6, 2019

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## **Tiana Caldwell**

My name is Tiana Caldwell, and I am a leader with KC Tenants.

Last Christmas my family and I spent the night in a hotel room. Not because we were on vacation but because that's where we were living at the time. A couple of months earlier I had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer for the second time. Medical bills were adding up and my insurance was taking its time to reimburse me for my treatments which were very expensive out of pocket. We fell behind on rent and before my insurance came through, our landlord evicted us.

So we had an eviction on our record. And no one would rent to us. No one. All the places we were looking at were really bad. We finally found a place that looked decent enough, and they would rent to us even though we had a recent eviction. This turned out to be a disaster, however, when on the first night we were there sewage came up through the pipes. Without a Tenants Bill of Rights, these are the options out there for families like ours, who have evictions on their rental history. We were displaced again.

So on Christmas Day, my husband and our son AJ and I stayed in a hotel, not in a home of our own. My son AJ is 12 year old. He's amazing. Even though he knew things were not right, he's so patient and understanding for someone his age. But he shouldn't have to be. No kid should have to get dressed out of a suitcase and carry that weight with them to school. That ain't right.

My family and I deserve justice and the only way we'll get it is if this council passes a Tenants Bill of Rights, which will ensure that landlords cannot discriminate against families like ours because of rental history. I ask that you all do what is right by me and the thousands of other families who are evicted every year in Kansas City. Members of the Housing Committee, vote yes to pass and fully fund our Tenants Bill of Rights package. It's not too late to have my back.

## **D. Gillespie**

I will tell you a story of my personal stake in a tenant bill of rights. On May 29th, 2019 my son, my good looking boy, took his own life in my home. He was what the court calls a 2 time felon. When he was paroled to my home, he was told he had to find somewhere else to reside. He moved to a house with holes in the floor. He moved from there and moved into another place, only to find out he could not stay there either because they found out about his conviction history.

I miss him daily. But I am glad he is gone. He suffers no more.

Every year 6,000 persons are paroled to KC. To deny housing to those persons is what I can double jeopardy. They have done the time, only to find out they are still doing time.

On November 6 I showed you a picture of my son. I showed you all I have left of him: A \$30 urn of ashes. This is not right. Someone pays their debt once they are released, they should return all rights due to them as citizens.

So what I am asking is that you stand with me to ratify this Tenant Bill of Rights. So no other mother has to go through life with a hole in her heart. Will you stand with me and vote yes?

## **Jenay Manley**

Hi, my name is Jenay and I am a leader with KC Tenants. In May, after waiting 5 years, my family finally got pulled off the waiting list for Section 8. Our bags were packed weeks in advance as we prepared to move into stability. When I went to the housing authority to receive my voucher information, I was given a list of landlords who would be willing to take the voucher. I was told to call them to see if they had any properties open. I was also given a list of property management companies that would accept my voucher. For days, I called these people, only to be turned away.

"We don't have units available."

"The only properties I have open right now are too nice for section 8."

"I've asked them to take me off their list, I haven't taken vouchers for years."

"Well, you can come check out my property, but are you sure you can afford it?"

We only had 30 days to find a new home because I had given 30 day notice to our previous apartment so they would give me a reference for the next place. And on top of that, like every other voucher holder, housing authority informed me that I had 30 days to find someone to take the voucher, or we would lose it.

The thought of losing our voucher after years of waiting... returning to the back of the line... I couldn't take it. Those days I spent calling landlords and being rejected were the only days I had off with my kids. The last day I had to take a sick day without pay because I was desperate. I finally found a place, but for too many people in Kansas City, there's a very ugly ending to this story.

With the KC Tenants bill of rights, the stresses of moving would be just that, MOVING stresses. NOT the stresses of potentially being homeless with my two babies. The bill of rights would END discrimination on the basis of lawful source of income.

Section 8 provides housing access and stability for vulnerable tenants like me, a low income but hardworking young black mom. Stigma associated with Section 8 can mostly be attributed to racism and classism. Landlords will say that the program has too much red tape, but the reality is that Section 8 has an incredibly low bar for inspections (even lower than the City's Healthy Homes). Ending source of income discrimination also benefits people like tipped workers in the service industry who may have cash on hand but don't have the pay stub. We need and deserve places to live. This is common sense, and it's good for Kansas City. Please vote yes.

## **Maya Neal**

Hello, my name is Maya Neal, and I am a leader and organizer with KC Tenants. I work part-time at the Don Bosco Senior Center, delivering Meals on Wheels and aiding seniors in Independent living. I am deeply invested in my community.

I have faced numerous invasions of my privacy at the hands of my property managers. I have been subjected to multiple random unit searches. The last day of my lease, the maintenance workers entered my unit without my consent. I was in the middle of moving and they stole my cleaning supplies. When they saw me enter the building, they fled the property with my supplies. \$200 of cleaning supplies, and left my door open. Due to them violating my lease, I was not able to finish cleaning the appliances on time. And as a result I have not received my security deposit. That was back in September. The landlord won't communicate with me. I'm out over \$490. That might not be a lot for you, but it is for me. I keep feeling like I'm watching my life fall apart while paying for it.

The KC Tenants Bill of Rights, which I helped to write, ensures that tenants like me get proper notice before the landlord enters the unit. And—this is important—it would have given me a path to real accountability.

Mayor Lucas and members of the Housing Committee, I urge you to vote YES, on the whole package, and do so today.

## **James Owens**

Hiya. I am James and I am a leader with K C Tenants. I have worked since I was 13 years old. I worked in a salvage yard pulling parts and I also worked for an oil field construction outfit loading out barges and learning the iron workers trade working after school and weekends. I held very gainful employment my whole life until a few years back, I was involved in a near fatal work related accident. The road to recovery has been long and is still ongoing. As a result, I am no longer able to work in the same field as before, but I still do my best as often as I can to take care of my 2 little ones as I am a single father and both of them have trauma issues from their time with their mother. For a long time I couldn't work at all and eventually lost everything. I was immersed in despair and went through a couple of long bouts with homelessness. I tried to achieve stable housing on my own, but with both mental and physical limitations the dream eluded me. My only saving grace, or so I thought, came in the form of housing assistance. It was supposed to open a new chapter in my life and to that end, it did. A chapter of discrimination and harassment and of having to settle for whatever "passed inspection" which is a joke.

Being in Truman Behavioral Healthcare, I hear many stories like mine and worse. Because we receive housing assistance, we have to settle for substandard living conditions in neighborhoods we'd rather not be in. Because we receive housing assistance there must be something inherently wrong with them, they must be difficult to deal with or dirty or flighty. Because of this prejudice, the list of property owners that accept them are short and they only have a few units that they can deal with.

An ENFORCED Source of Income antidiscrimination ordinance would open access to a larger housing market giving people a better chance of using their housing assistance instead of losing it to deadlines.

Mr Mayor, committee members, we need you to be the leaders we elected you to be. Kansas City should be the example to which all others aspire to be. I don't want, 15-20 years from now, my kids standing here presenting similar arguments to a different elected body. Please be bold, please be decisive and most importantly, please land on the side of what's right.

Thank you

## **Brandy Granados**

Good afternoon, my name is Brandy Granados. I am a leader with KC Tenants. This is my son Jude Griffith. We live in Blue Hills. On November 8th last year, my heater exploded while my son and I were home. I called my landlord after the fire department only to be told to "just move." I couldn't do that.

I stayed and tried calling codes. They came by but we still had no hot water for a month and no heat for two months. During that time my landlord got angry that I was reporting him and took me to court two times to try to get me out. The first time I defended myself and won. But the day after court I received a 30 day notice to move, attached to the court claim. This was a clear act of retaliation. He took me to court for possession of the house and then won that time. If I had a lawyer, it could have gone different. I was on a month to month lease and he exploited that to get me out. We were given till April 21st to move. April 22nd a new tenant moved in without anything being fixed.

Our story doesn't end there. Jude and I then spent 3 months in a shelter. Living in a shelter is no life for a child. I was working full time. I had deposit money and rent but received 67 no's from landlords. 67 no's. They considered my two court cases as evictions even though they were not!

If I had a tenant bill of rights the last 10 months, my life and Jude's would have been much different. the bill of rights will change the story for many tenants that live in KCMO and now live on the streets. I ask you Mayor Lucas and the members of the housing committee to pass the tenants bill of rights, if not for me or jude than so no other person has to be homeless because of needing heat. If you can't pass it please explain this to Jude because I have not figured out how to.

## **Tonya Bowman**

My name is Tonya Bowman and I am a leader with KC Tenants. I am living homeless RIGHT NOW. A recent eviction has become both a cause and a condition of my poverty.

The eviction has limited my options for a decent place to stay. Last year, I stayed in a place where I had mice having a circus convention in my house. Man, it was gross. And now, I'm trapped in homelessness cuz no one will rent to me, even when I have cash in hand.

I've been scammed by landlords, especially out of state corporate landlords, who falsely advertise low rent but have crazy high utilities. Last place this happened, I don't know how but my light bill got to \$900. I am still paying down that bill FROM 2013. It's one of the reasons I can't afford a deposit for a new place.

The KC Tenants Bill of Rights would change my life in so many ways. It would protect me from discrimination on the basis of my prior evictions. It would mandate that landlords provide me a utilities estimate when I move into a new place, so I can stop being scammed.

I've been homeless since February. My morale has plummeted. In the shelter I feel sub-human. It just kills the spirit. And I have a lot of spirit. But it's killing my spirit to be homeless. If I'm asking for a hug, there's a problem. Kansas City, I need a hug. I need you to pass our Tenant Bill of Rights package. Really, I needed it YESTERDAY. Please vote yes.

## **Rebeca Amezcua**

Hello, my name is Rebeca Amezcua, and I am a leader with KC Tenants. I have lived in Kansas City for over 4 years and I keep coming back to the questions: WHO is this city being built for, but also WHO does this city welcome.

I worked in the service industry where there were too many people who counted on Starbucks being open to have a safe space to rest. I would have to turn a blind eye because I knew they had nowhere else to go.

TOO many people do not have a place to go or are forced to live in substandard housing. I do not want to live in a city that doesn't care for the needs of the working class. I want to live in a city that prioritizes the lives of half of its people over the lives of a handful of landlords. The Tenants Bill or Rights not only NEEDS to be passed but NEEDS REAL ENFORCEMENT.

Enforcement looks like an office that tenants can turn to for information on their rights, an office they can trust to investigate their claims, and a process through the city to suspend landlord licenses if they violate tenant rights. Ultimately, it seems obvious to me that bad landlords— in particular the repeat offenders— should lose their licenses altogether.

Increased tenant protections shouldn't scare property owners, and they aren't what's driving them out of the market. The real enemies to local landlords are out-of-state corporate landlords. They are often the worst actors in the market, treating tenants badly, keeping their properties in poor condition, violating state and city law, obscuring their identities to evade accountability, and making a bad name for landlords in general. Corporate landlords are making it harder for local landlords to compete.

We've worked with landlords on our proposal. All of them have told us a simple truth: what we're asking for is not anything radical. If a landlord can't comply with these regulations, they shouldn't be in business.

Please pass this package and fully fund its enforcement.

## **Simone Allie Sharda**

My name is Simone Allie Sharda. I am a leader with KC Tenants and I am a disabled transgender girl.

This is not a fairytale.

Once upon a time, in the basement apartment where I lived a few years ago, a landlord acquired my property in the middle of my lease. I watched as he began to gentrify it, and one day he entered my home without my prior consent. He interrupted me and intimidated me with aggressive conversation as I was putting on my makeup and getting ready for work. I stood there, in my kitchen, in my pajamas, not 20 feet from the bathroom, as he was telling me he was increasing the rent and cost of utilities for the SECOND time that year. I now needed to send him \$400 a month for utilities, he said. When I questioned the outrageous increase he said, "WHAT YOU ARE should be grateful for WHAT IT CAN GET."

Let me spell out for you: Who I am is not a "what." I am a human being, a person who deserves her human rights.

If I must qualify my worth to you beyond that, let me put it this way: I am a resident of Kansas City. I am a tenant who pays her bills. I am a hard worker, and I am a voter.

I deserve safe, affordable housing, not landlords who treat me as less than human. People like this should not be able to exert power over my life.

I compel you to pass this resolution and package. Landlords will be held accountable for their abuse. The Utilities Disclosure section will stop property owners from exploiting their vulnerable queer and disabled tenants through outrageous utility costs.

I compel you to pass this resolution and package. it will establish freedom from discrimination on the basis of gender identity and gender expression, identities held by people of ALL races, ages, and backgrounds. The vulnerable tenants of the housing crisis will be able to lead safer, and more stable, lives.

I compel you to pass this resolution and package. You must pass it in full. Fund it. It addresses my problems. It ensures that my comrades who spoke before you today will be in better situations than they have been made to endure for decades. It will bring humanity to Kansas City. The lives of at least half of the people who have made this city what it is, who you rely on to cast votes for you, will change. Don't make me go through this ever again. Don't make US go through this ever again. Prove that you are people of your word, and that you stand with working class people in Kansas city. Vote YES on our tenant bill of rights package and be a champion for our city and tenants.

## **James Shelby**

My personal stake in the KC Tenants Bill of Rights has to do with prior conviction. I served 22 of a 25 yr sentence. I was released on parole and told to be a productive and law abiding citizen.

I was released on 8/9/19 and I became homeless on 8/11/19 and since then I've been sleeping around the city in my car because land owners don't care give me and/or my kind the opportunity to rent from them due to my prior conviction. I'm living out of my car.

Land owners should not be forced to rent to me! However, I'm just asking for the right to be heard prior to just being preemptively condemned without any process whatsoever.

## **Sierra West**

My name is Sierra West, and I'm a tenant in the 4th district at 36th and Broadway.

My story starts back in March when I was laid off from my job and lost my car. It was a rough patch in my life and I had a hard time coping with the losses. Things became even worse when my dad was diagnosed with kidney and liver failure shortly after. My mother, father and I were living under the same roof in Raytown and barely making it through. Our family relationships were breaking down completely. After an emergency with my father, I was forced to move out and find a new place to live immediately. I had quite a bit of money saved up before I was laid off and so I thought it would be easier to move out and start over again. I was completely wrong. Every place I applied to live had to have proof of source of income and I had none since losing my job. Even though I could have paid the deposit and a few months rent, it was not enough. I found my options vanishing before me and I felt helpless and desperate. Eventually I resorted to lying on my applications to obtain housing and I finally got accepted. I finally had the chance to start over and now I'm gainfully employed full time.

With protections against discrimination, I could have avoided the hardships of applying to so many places just to be rejected entirely. Even people who are laid off need a place to live. Actually, we especially need stable and affordable housing to get back onto our feet.

We need the tenant's bill of rights to protect people like me from discrimination on the basis of our source of income.

For all of the citizens of KC, we need these protections to keep our families together. Any one of us could be laid off and this tenant bill of rights would protect us in the most vulnerable situation imaginable.

## **Julia Cole**

Good afternoon, my name is Julia Cole and I am a property owner. I'm here today to tell a different side to the story.

I was a renter almost all my life, and suffered many of the crimes and indignities that have become routine for tenants – eviction without just cause, living with rats and bugs, and the repeated, unjustified theft of my damage deposit. My life changed a few years ago when I was finally able to purchase a stable home. I own property now because I grew up in a political system that gave my white, working class family an equal opportunity. Because of my good fortune, I wake up in a warm, safe space every day.

But why should this safe space to call home be available to me and not to so many others? Is it because I was born 'lucky'? Is that right? If you connect to a moral compass of some kind – however that happens for you – then you know in this spirit-filled place that that AIN'T right! All human beings should have the right to live in a safe and decent home, free from harassment and abuse. I see that there are other property owners in this room, who are here to fight the protections guaranteed by this bill.

I say: Shame on denying the privilege that gave us a head start! Shame on believing that poor people are more criminal and destructive than the wealthy! And shame on dismissing the truth that a housing business is paid for by the labor of countless tenants! Above all, shame on forgetting that privilege should be matched by responsibility. In the richest country, no person should be homeless, and no one should be denied an equal opportunity to thrive. Right now, the protections that exist for the less 'fortunate' among us are absent, insufficient or unevenly enforced. We need a Tenant's Bill of Rights in Kansas City, and we need it now!

## **Tracie Russell**

My name is Tracie Russell. I am a tenant and a mother and a felon. I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee in poverty. I've been getting beat on since before I can remember, by my mother, by my siblings, by neighbors and relatives. My childhood was violent but I thought it was normal because it was all I'd ever known. I became homeless for the first time when I was 14. I also got caught in the juvenile system for the first time when I was 14. That's not a coincidence. By the time I was 19, I was in prison for defending myself against an attacker.

At the age of 26, I was out of prison and a felon working the only job that would hire me at a movie theater making \$8 an hour. I had a son to feed and bills to pay and even though I worked overtime as much as I could, I fell behind on rent. I got evicted.

So I was a homeless, black, single mother felon with an eviction on her record. Does that check enough boxes for you?

My baby and I lived in dirty, dangerous hotels and slept in my car because with my rental and conviction history, no one would rent to me. I got a good job that paid a living wage, more than enough to pay rent but still, no one would rent to me and my baby.

Because of the instability of my housing situation, my son does not live with me. And I can't find stable housing because no one will rent to me because of my rental history and felony. It's a cycle many people who look like me and grew up like I did can relate to and it ain't right.

I served my time. Why am I still being punished?

The day before the Tenant Bill of Rights was introduced to this committee, it was my son's 7th birthday. This Bill of Rights would mean that next year, on Ian's 8th birthday, I could throw him a party... finally in a home of our own.

**Members of the Housing Committee, my son and I need you to vote yes on this Tenant Bill of Rights. Thank you so much.**

## **Chris Stohrer**

My name is Chris Stohrer and I am a leader with KC Tenants. I have lived in your district, Councilman Ellington, for 5 years. When I first moved in I was thrilled because my apartment was right by both of the organizations that I volunteer with. The building had a solid reputation online so I signed my lease and moved in. Five years later, however, I have had water come through my ceiling three times and have spent days without heat. When I called to report these issues they ignored me so I went to the health department thinking my problems would be fixed.

Unfortunately, I was then retaliated against by my landlord. They found a loophole in the current system and decided to not renew my lease. Essentially they evicted me and it was clear that this was a direct result of my reporting the unhealthy conditions in my home.

This should not be allowed to happen. It is illegal to retaliate against tenants for reporting maintenance issues. It is illegal. BUT, there is no funding to enforce that my landlord is held accountable for his illegal actions. I am stuck, out of my house that I wanted to stay in, with no chance of receiving justice.

This is why I need a Tenant Bill of Rights. This piece of legislation will fund and enforce the laws which are already in place. This is not crazy, this is how it should be. What is the point of having protections in place if there is no one to make sure that they are enforced?

I ask that, as my representatives, you all vote yes to pass and fully fund a Tenant Bill of Rights. It is the right thing to do.

## **Wilson Vance**

My name is Wilson Vance and I am a leader with KC Tenants. I've lived in the 4th district my whole life. When I was 9, my mom was brutally attacked and her attackers kicked her in the head dozens of times. Afterwards, my mother had severe PTSD and brain damage. She was unable to be the kind of parent she and I needed her to be. My mom became abusive, both verbally and physically. It became clear that it was not a safe place for me to live so at the age of 16, I moved out of my mother's house for good.

I'd saved up, I dropped out of high school so I could work two jobs. I had prepared in every way that I could be independent. But no landlord would rent to me because of my age. I collected months worth of pay stubs. I petitioned for legal emancipation through the state. It was granted. No one would rent to me. I was homeless. I lived out of a backpack. I slept on people's couches. I was in situations and places no 16 year old should ever be in. The only reason I was able to gain stable housing was because I started dating someone who was 18. He had no job, he was addicted to drugs, he was abusive. But he was 18 and landlords would rent to him. I stayed in an abusive relationship because if I wanted somewhere to sleep at night, I had no other choice.

If City Council had passed a Tenant Bill of Rights back then, the memories I carry with me of my teenage years would be different. No one should have to make the choice between staying in an abusive situation and being homeless. I would have been protected against landlords discriminating against renting to me on the basis of my age. That would have changed my life.

Over the past month, I've been helping to organize a tenant union at a property that is rife with maintenance issues. But unfortunately, the property manager has threatened to evict any tenant who holds a meeting in their home and the landlord refuses to meet. Tenants have a right to organize but they do not have the power to force their landlord to the bargaining table and there is no office or funding to enforce that they won't be retaliated against when they do. Kansas City is a union town and I am so proud that it is; but these protections need to extend to the 48% of its citizens who are renters.

We need this Bill of Rights package passed and fully funded by Thanksgiving if we are to continue to say our city stands for inclusion, equality and working people. I implore you, members of the Housing Committee, vote yes. Pass this package.

## **Diane Charity**

My name is Diane Charity and y'all know me. I am a leader with KC Tenants. I have been a community activist for over 30 years. **There are two ways that our KC Tenants Bill of Rights would change my life.**

First, I've been scammed on my utilities. The place I live got tax credits to put solar panels on the roof. They advertised that utilities would be \$30 a month. To my dismay, my utility bills have been close to \$200 a month, sometimes as high as \$350. This causes me to go broke by the fifth of the month. I'm forced to work multiple jobs and take money from my family to make ends meet. When I asked the manager about the discrepancy, she told me that the solar panels didn't have to work, and I'd have to deal with the bills.

Second, my privacy has been violated. Just Monday, I was in a meeting with Mr. O'Neill. I got a phone call. It was my manager, something about the furnace. Now, I've been requesting repairs on the furnace for five years. I've never gotten a response. BUT all of a sudden she called to say she was about to enter my unit. I said... hell no! You're not going in there without any notice and definitely not without me being there. As Mr. O'Neill can confirm, I rushed out of our meeting and put an end to this. I wish I could tell you this was the ONLY time my rights have been violated in this way, but it's not. They do me and other tenants like this all the time. I write notes like THIS and leave them on my door when I leave the unit. Would you all live like this? I don't think so, none of us should have to.

KC Tenants Bill of Rights would change all of this mess. It would require landlords to provide an accurate utility estimate at the time of advertisement. And violations could be punishable by suspending or revoking the landlord's license. Secondly, the Tenant Bill of Rights REQUIRES affirmative consent from the tenant before landlord entry into the unit, except for emergencies or if the landlord gives over 48 hours notice AND the tenant agrees to the specific date/time, the persons to enter, and the reason for the visit.

For these reasons, I urge you stand your ground, stand up for us. Vote YES on the KC Tenants Bill of Rights package and FULLY fund it.

## **Gary Thomas**

I have been a member of the United Auto Workers for roughly 6 years. In that short amount of time I, along with the help of others, have accomplished many acts of which I am very proud of. I was the Chair and founder (of which there were 4) of the Motorcycle committee within local 249( It was possibly the first new committee our local has seen in its history) With a dedicated, passionate group of members, the motorcycle committee saved homes from being condemned, we painted schools and homeless shelters, we built structures for veterans, animal shelters and the elderly, we delivered roses to widows on Valentine's day and helped them move when called upon, after violent storms we cleared brush and fallen limbs for those on a fixed income free of charge, we attended rallies for the Fight for 15, walked picket lines and protested in the name of the working class. In the first 2 years of its existence the motorcycle committee won 2 awards from the community. In a single year we volunteered over 100,000 hours of service to the Kansas City metro area without taking a dime of Lost Time from our Local.

I am not writing all this to brag. Without the forward thinking of my Local president Jason Starr and my Bargaining Chair Jim Fisher none of these things would have been possible. In my opinion they are very principled, highly intelligent men who better our local union and communities daily and prepare it for the future.

All that said.

I, personally, couldn't be more proud to have them as our leadership. They took a stand for the equality and betterment of the entire membership of the UAW.

The same can be said for the leadership of the KC Tenants. They are taking a stand for all of Kansas City today. I am proud to be their ally. With this bill, children can sleep in safe, clean homes. Veterans can rest easy knowing that another fight for their freedom isn't around the corner, the elderly can enjoy their remaining years, the LGTBQ community can have the tranquility of knowing a small equality is granted.

I hope I can count on the membership of this City Council to be those same kind of leaders. The people who identify not only where we are as citizens but what we can accomplish when given the freedom to accomplish it. I believe in the power of people, I believe in the power of leadership, especially that of my local and KC Tenants. I hope you give me reason to believe in the leadership of the City Council.

## **Candace Ladd**

My name is Candace Ladd and I am a social worker interning in anti-eviction defense at Heartland Center for Jobs and Freedom and I am a member of KC Tenants. Every Thursday morning, I show up at the Jackson County Courthouse for the eviction docket with an attorney to provide free legal advice to tenants. To the committee members before me, have you ever been? Let me tell you what I see. As the elevator doors open and tenants, landlords, and lawyers flood the hallway, it's not hard to tell who the tenants are. If I see someone who is dressed in a work uniform, or bouncing a baby on their hip, or is an elderly person using a wheelchair or other mobility aids, they are almost always a tenant being evicted by a landlord wearing a polished suit or high heels. Tenants don't have time to educate themselves on the intricacies of Missouri landlord-tenant law before the court date so instead, every week, I listen to people's stories and with a lawyer, give legal advice about how to represent themselves in court. It's not enough - 99.8% of evictions are won by landlords, leaving the workers, single mothers, children, elderly and disabled kicked out, locked out and with their things piled high on the curb.

If you pass this package and establish a Rental Housing Assistance Unit, the city will be investing in a future where tenants understand their rights and can access resources to avoid costly eviction and improve their conditions. But I don't just want this for the tenants I see every week in court - I want this for myself. You see, I lived in an apartment where despite my repeated requests, the landlord did not actually treat for the bugs that crawled in my cabinets and did nothing when mold bloomed on my ceiling after water gushed through the apartment above me and into mine during heavy storms. If there had been a Rental Housing Assistance Unit, I would have known who to turn to to hold my landlord accountable for a safe and healthy home that I paid for on the first of every month. Tenants deserve to have someone in City Hall who's on their side, and furthermore, they deserve legal representation, not just legal advice. I urge you to vote yes on the Tenant Bill of Rights to give tenants in Kansas City equal footing with landlords in court and in their homes.

## **Beth Pauley**

Hello, my name is Beth Pauley and I am here today representing Metropolitan Energy Center. We are Kansas City's oldest environmental nonprofit, and we are here today to voice our support for the energy disclosure and energy efficiency components in the KC Tenant's Bill of Rights.

I want to thank Mayor Lucas and the Housing Committee for allowing this important dialogue today. I also want to thank KC Tenants for inviting MEC (and me) to participate in this testimony and platform. Mayor Lucas, when you spoke at our Renter's Efficiency Summit a couple of months ago, you said that people living in energy inefficient housing who experience the negative economic, health, and climate impacts should be at the center of the climate conversation. This resonated with the staff at MEC.

Energy Efficiency has always been at the heart of MEC's mission since we were founded in 1985 to bring weatherization programs and assistance to low income families. We have worked with thousands of businesses, municipalities, and residents over the years, including Kansas City, MO. We are around these issues daily, and are qualified to assess what's working well, and what needs to be done to improve these programs.

Utility costs are a major component of housing and living costs, and while tenants are usually responsible for their utilities, they don't have access to cost saving energy efficiency programs in the same way building owners and home owners do.<sup>1</sup> Energy inefficient buildings exacerbate the cost of living, harm the health of building inhabitants, and add to the harmful emissions in our city. Retrofitting buildings is one of the top climate solutions, but we can't just implement these programs for affluent homes and businesses. In addition to the health and environmental benefits of retrofitting buildings, energy efficiency programs are usually sought after because of their immediate cost saving benefits<sup>2</sup>. Because of the cost-savings and environmental solutions that energy efficiency programs bring, the City of Kansas City passed benchmarking ordinances which have saved money, boosted the economy, and decreased emissions in our city<sup>3</sup>. Although this ordinance still has some kinks to work out with funding and enforcement, which I hope to talk to you about at another time, it signals Kansas City's commitment to climate solutions.

While Kansas City should be commended for these climate solutions, we also need to acknowledge the progress that still needs to be made. According to the ACEEE, Kansas City ranks as one of the highest energy burden cities in the US, meaning that low income families are choosing between their utility bills and their basic needs<sup>4</sup>. Another study examined cities' equity progress in climate implementation, and Kansas City received a 0 (out of 1.5 points possible)<sup>5</sup>. In order for policies to be equitable and just, the people who are impacted by the problems the policies are addressing need to be included in policy making. KC Tenants have given us an opportunity to identify the gaps that are missing in the city's climate policies, and implement policies that would benefit our city's most vulnerable people.

Energy disclosures give prospective renters a full picture of what they can expect for their living expenses. I want to address some misconceptions I've heard about energy disclosure policies. First, there's the suggestion that the responsibility of disclosures should be on the tenant. There is already a disconnect between available energy efficiency programs, and putting this on tenants is assuming that the average person has a concept of energy efficiency and utility burdens. This is unrealistic. I'll use myself as an example – before I started at MEC two years ago, I wouldn't have had any idea that this should be a step in my rental research process. Additionally, organizations like MEC would be tasked with

filling this educational gap through increased outreach. While we're committed to educational outreach, our resources are limited. It would be more efficient and economical for landlords to incorporate this small step into their lease agreements. Lastly, energy disclosures should be welcomed by landlords who are committed to providing healthy, affordable, and environmentally friendly places to live.

I've also heard the suggestion that energy consumption is mostly behavioral. While it is true that a portion of energy consumption can be attributed to an individual's behavior, it is unfounded and incorrect to assume that the utility burden that disproportionately impacts low income families and people of color in our community is mostly based on behavior. In fact, Kansas City's housing and building stock mostly consists of older homes. When the leaders of KC Tenants cite the living conditions that are making them and their children sick, energy efficiency is one of the solutions that can bring relief economically and medically.

According to a joint study by the ACEEE and the Physicians for Social Responsibility, negative health impacts of energy inefficient housing include lung cancer, asthma, congestive heart failure, and more.<sup>6</sup>

Today, MEC is asking the housing committee to pass the energy disclosure and weatherization components of the KC Tenants Bill of Rights, and fund the necessary implementation and enforcement measures. The energy disclosure and weatherization components proposed in this bill will drastically improve the quality of life of people living in the buildings – financially and environmentally – while continuing the progress that Kansas City has made on climate action. Thank you again (both council and KC Tenants) for allowing us to participate in this important conversation.

## **Rev. Holly McKissick**

I'm Rev. Holly McKissick, pastor of Peace Church United Church of Christ in Kansas City, Missouri. I've been a pastor in this city for 32 years and I'm a leader with Jobs with Justice.

I support the KC Tenants Bill of Rights because the policies that are made in this chamber shape people's lives for a long time; they shape the future for generations.

I live in a lovely home near the Nelson Atkins, and the path that led to that home is a common one for people who look like me.

My grandfather came to this country in 1880, and, as a teenager, inherited a farm. That path—owning, inheriting—was not open to the sharecroppers, the black and brown folks, who farmed around him, even though their families had been farming for centuries before my grandfather's people arrived.

My grandfather went on to have 11 children and they all became home owners. Today, there are some 119 descendants, and almost all of them are homeowners.

On the other side, my dad grew up in a stressed family but after he served in the marines he came back to Texas, and with the help of the GI bill and FHA loans, went to college and bought a home with my mom. Later they sold it, bought a nicer home, sold it, bought a nicer home, sold it...and built wealth the way white middle class folks built wealth. None of those programs were available to the black soldiers who had served in his newly integrated battalion.

I share all this because we didn't get here by accident. We didn't just wake up one day and find ourselves in this situation. We got to this place because of policies that, by design, left out people of color.

We see the impact of these policies every day...from people work full time ( and then some) and can't afford a place to live... to people who have a conviction or an eviction, who find the door shut again and again...

We need new policies that will bring a new future...that's what brings us out today...

**the prophetic witness of the KC Tenants:** this strong, beautiful, courageous group who have risen up, who have come together to demand new policies

and they have started where prophets always start...

by crying out....

in the scripture, that's how change always begins...with crying out, with saying: it's not right—

people sleeping on the streets, in their cars,...kids are moving from school to school....families one crisis away from being put out

it's not just, it can't stand, it's against the will of God...

but KC tenants aren't just crying out...that's just part of being a prophet...the other part, the tougher part, is bringing to speech the hopes and dreams of people that have been buried so long they have almost been lost..

that's what KC Tenants have done...

they have come here today inviting us to dream, to imagine a community where everyone has a safe, warm home...where people, all people, are seen as precious, treasured, valued...

it's the dream we hear in the words of the prophet isaiah...

21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. ... my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands.

That's why I'm here because I'm tired of living in a country, a city, that continues to advantage people who look like me. I want a new future, by design. I want to wake up in a city where everyone has a roof over their head and enough to eat...

I'm thankful for KC Tenants for giving voice to that dream.

### **Gina Chiala**

My name is Gina Chiala. I am the Executive Director and lead attorney for the Heartland Center for Jobs and Freedom. We are a small nonprofit organization dedicated to enforcing the rights of low wage workers, including tenants. We deeply support KC Tenants and all local movements organizing for fair and affordable housing, living wages and union rights.

The Heartland Center is on the frontlines of the eviction crisis. You can find us in the courthouse halls ever Thursday, as four courtrooms simultaneously handle hundreds of eviction cases.

We strongly support the tenants' bill of rights and ordinance package because the issues these ordinances address are familiar to us. We regularly meet low-wage workers who are experiencing chronic homelessness because they have evictions on their records. We also meet tenants who could avoid an eviction and negotiate an agreement with their landlords if they could only move – but they lack the

means to do so. That is why a housing transition program is important. We know that tenants are experiencing retaliation in violation of the law but those rights are not being enforced. We also know that tenants are dealing with unreasonable utility costs due to defects in the home that owners refuse to fix.

In addition to supporting these ordinances, I want to talk about what has been left off the table. The tenants facing eviction are numerous. The lawyers present to represent those tenants are almost entirely absent. So we are there intervening, providing tenants with information and free legal advice in an effort to keep them housed. But it's not enough.

We know how to stop evictions. We know how to negotiate win-win agreements that solve landlord-tenant disputes. We are also well versed in the defenses available to tenants and can pursue them and win. Our success rate in stopping evictions when we are able to formally represent a tenant is very strong.

But our ability and Legal Aid's ability to formally represent tenants is far outpaced by the number of cases landlords choose to bring. The vast majority of tenants face the incredibly steep challenge of defending themselves against seasoned attorneys and their chances of succeeding pro se are small. The solution is simple: fund attorneys to represent tenants and even the playing field.

As the eviction crisis sweeps the nation, cities are responding by doing just this. Cleveland, Minneapolis, Newark, New York, Washington, Philadelphia, New Jersey, San Francisco, have acted.

The ordinances you are considering today are important first steps toward creating humane housing policies. But without the right to counsel and without affordable housing, I am sorry to say that the eviction crisis will continue unabated.