

**OPENING STATEMENT**  
**TESTIMONY BEFORE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS**  
**MARCH 4, 2024**  
**ATLANTA, GA**

Good morning. I'm Esther Graff-Radford and I run a private law firm that represents tenants in housing issues across metro Atlanta. I work closely with Legal Aid and the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation and local housing nonprofits and I do a lot of work educating lawyers and the community about tenant rights. The cases that I work on deal with landlords not repairing their properties, landlords retaliating against tenants who ask for repairs, housing discrimination, and unfair and deceptive business practices by landlords and management companies.

I personally have lived in subsidized housing as a small child. Some of my earliest memories are of being a kid in the Eastside Hills Section 8 project in Farmerville, Louisiana. What our kids are going through in subsidized housing is personal to me.

My tenant clients are mostly working and disabled women with children. Some of their landlords get money from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs or from a county housing authority in the form of Section 8 vouchers. Some landlords get money directly from HUD in the form of project based rental assistance. And some landlords got millions of dollars from the government to buy and renovate their properties in the form of Low Income Housing Tax Credits. Usually, the same landlord benefits from a combination of multiple forms of subsidies. In exchange for these millions of dollars of subsidies, these landlords are supposed to provide housing that is kept up to a basic repair standard. The lights and the water and the heat are supposed to work, the toilets are supposed to flush, people are supposed to be able to cook meals and take showers and get a full night's sleep, have their friends over, do homework, hang up their clothes in the closets and put cereal and bread in the kitchen cabinet and milk in the fridge - all the basic things that everyone does at home.

The sad truth is subsidized landlords in Georgia who are getting this government money often are not providing the basic housing that we the taxpayers are paying for. I frequently see that landlords are neglecting maintenance to the point that they are endangering tenants. While most of my clients are in metro Atlanta, I get calls from people across the state. I frequently see situations where sewage is backing up in people's apartments because of old and broken down plumbing, not once or twice but chronically, to the point that families are expected to live in homes that are continually soaked in raw sewage and have no working bathrooms. Some of my clients have to use the bathroom at a neighboring business or in buckets lined with plastic bags. I see extreme rat and cockroach infestations. A lot of my clients in subsidized properties can't store food in the kitchen cabinets because the rats will just tear into it and eat it and urinate all over it. They can't put food in their fridge or cook because the appliances don't work. I see horrific mold because of unmitigated water leaks and sewage backups. I see lead in drinking water. I see situations where families have no heat or air conditioning for months at a time. I see collapsing ceilings full of asbestos and rotting floors where you can see right to the dirt below and the families are putting boards down to try to keep from falling through the floors. I see vacant units piled with garbage that share walls with occupied apartments.

There seems to be very little meaningful enforcement when tenants report these repair issues. We often see that local Code Enforcement will issue citations and take a landlord to code court but the landlord

will simply pay a fine and continue the same behavior. When HUD or the Department of Community Affairs inspect, they either miss the worst issues in occupied units, or they take the landlord's word for it that the issues have been repaired. There is often not meaningful reinspection, especially since COVID. For housing choice voucher tenants, the end result is often that they simply lose their housing and have to move abruptly. There's no real consequence for the landlord. We often see that landlords retaliate against tenants who ask for repairs. People outside metro Atlanta are often just out of luck for finding representation or alternative housing.

This is leaving the most vulnerable Georgians without a safe home base. Kids can't thrive in school when they were woken up by rats running across their bed and they can't take a shower because the tub is full of feces. Parents can't work when they sleep crowded on one mattress with their kids because the other bedrooms are all covered in mold and sewage. This is an issue that impacts every aspect of Georgia families' lives. Thank you for listening and paying attention.