Good morning Representative Khan, Senator Moore, and members of the Housing Committee:

My name is Sarah Giovanniello and I live in New Haven. I am a proud member of Local 34 and a vice president of the Blake Street Tenants Union. I am testifying in support of the good cause eviction bill with an expansion to include 1-4 unit multifamilies that are not owner occupied. I am asking for that expansion because megalandlords like mine, Ocean Management, own and have seriously degraded an astronomical number of 1-4 unit multifamily buildings in my city.

I last testified before this committee a year ago. I told you all about how my famously negligent landlord, who operates under the name Ocean Management, had been charged with dozens of counts of misdemeanors related to housing code violations. I told you about how he bought my complex, which has 70 units, refused to renew any leases for the existing tenants, slapped a coat of paint on the walls and raised the rent by 50% for new people coming in. And I told you how, when faced with the reality of moving out in the worst housing market Connecticut has ever seen, a large group of us decided to stay, form a tenant union, and fight for the happiness and the stability that we as hardworking people deserve.

Well, since then, a lot has happened. In July 2023, after a year of ignoring us, Ocean Management started calling my neighbors, whose leases had all expired, demanding a 30% rent increase. The undertone was: pay 30% more in two weeks, or you’ll be kicked out. Our response was to stand up for ourselves. We had neighbors file with the Fair Rent Commission, which is currently the only legal way to contest this kind of rent increase in Connecticut, and which supposedly comes with eviction protections. Ocean caught on to this and, for some reason, they stopped calling down the list. We also told the Ocean Management office that we would not negotiate individually, only collectively as a tenant union.

To our surprise they came to the table and we had a few negotiations sessions. Then I guess they got frustrated because we kept telling them regular people can’t afford a 30% increase. So after our third meeting, sixteen families found notices to quit on their doors for “lapse of time.” Every single person who hadn’t filed with the Fair Rent Commission (because Ocean hadn’t called them) was given a notice.

To Ocean’s surprise, even though we were all absolutely terrified, we didn’t back down. We stood up for ourselves. We went to the media, we sued them for retaliation, we rallied outside their office, and we prepared to have evictions on our records. And eventually, Ocean caved. They rescinded the evictions and negotiated a new contract with us, which, after settling in November 2023, they still have yet to sign. So even though we won that battle AND came to an agreement with the landlord on a 2.5 year lease with scheduled rent increases, my neighbors and I could still receive another notice to quit.

Landlords are used to using lapse of time evictions to bully and terrify tenants into compliance. Pay 30% more, or you’ll be on the street. Form a tenant union and you’ll be on the street. The lack of stability that an expired lease holds is terrifying for people. About 30 families moved out of Blake Street before the fight even began, because they couldn’t take the uncertainty and were afraid of eviction. And many of the remaining 30 would have been pushed out due to high rent if we hadn’t stood up for ourselves.

The existing tenant protections under the law are simply not enough for the current Connecticut housing market. Landlords have perverse incentives to kick out good tenants, like me and my neighbors, that they didn’t have before. Tenant protections need to be seriously strengthened if we want to keep communities like mine together and avoid people falling into homelessness and poverty. Thank you.