

**Pennsylvania Senate
Senate Democratic Policy Committee
Hearing on Pennsylvania's Housing Crisis**

March 31, 2021

Testimony of Ashley Butler

Hello! My name is Ashley Butler. I am a single mother of three beautiful children, a little girl and 2 boys, ages 7, 12, and 14 respectively. Professionally, I am a Certified Dental and Oral and Maxillofacial Surgical Assistant. I'm currently considering the Paralegal field in light of my experience as a domestic violence survivor and the passion I have developed for advocacy for victims. I am originally from the State College area, home to Penn State. I lived there my entire life until I moved to Pittsburgh with my children and now ex-husband in 2018, after accepting a position in the Oral and Maxillofacial Surgical Program at the University of Pittsburgh School of Dental Medicine. I had initially desired to obtain entry into dental school, but God had other plans for me.

Within a few months of relocating to Pittsburgh, after roughly 12 years of marriage, I nearly lost my life to the man who had vowed to protect me. We were arguing, and the next thing I knew, he had picked me up by the throat, threw me on the stairs and began choking me. I remember not even being able to scream for help, and I remember the fear that flooded in as I could not breathe. As my vision blurred, I recall wondering if this is what it felt like to drown. My last thought was of my children's faces, as they stood on the far end of the room, watching this transpire, and I was helpless to stop it. Then everything faded to black. I woke up hours later on the stairs. My first thought was that I was dead. This man had literally left me there to die on those steps, alone. My children later told me that my ex-husband had instructed them to get into his truck because they were "going to go play with friends." My children have recalled to me

thinking that their father had killed me, but they were too afraid to ask questions. That is never something any child should have to experience. I knew that day that I had to get away from this man or I would die the next time he put his hands on me.

I was terrified. How would I leave him safely to avoid future retaliation? He had already threatened multiple times that my life would be a living hell if I ever left him. How would I take care of my three children after he systematically prevented me from keeping a long-term job or reaching out for outside help? People often assume that leaving an abuser is an easy black and white task, but it is a blend of grey and the formula is anyone's guess.

In the weeks that followed, I prepared both emotionally and monetarily to leave my ex-husband. I sought help from a local women's center, and I obtained a PFA against my ex-husband. The police met him in our rented home and escorted him out. Soon thereafter, I informed my landlord of what had transpired, and I asked for permission to break my lease early and leave, for my safety.

My landlord denied my request. He spoke of the fact that he was an attorney and that the lease was strategically written with regard to landlord/tenant law. Having no choice, I tried to make it work, until my ex-husband began violating the PFA and stalking me. I again began asking my landlord for reprieve from my lease, and my landlord continuously denied my request. In fact, he went as far as to take my ex-husband's side, stating to me that he had spoken with my ex-husband and was told that the child support he paid me (which he in fact was not paying) was more than enough to cover the rent. So I continued to live there, and always found a way to pay rent to my landlord each month, even if it meant eating one meal a day, often struggling to pull my 10 plus hour shifts in the operating room, to make sure my children had a roof over their heads and 3 meals a day. But the stalking only got worse.

My ex-husband stalked me at home and on the way to and from work and at work. He proceeded to steal my mail, including all of my court documents. Eventually, I could no longer live with the fear that he would attack me again, and I fled the home, moving with my 3 children 45 minutes away to a local women's shelter. We stayed there for 6 weeks. We were on lockdown at the shelter twice because my ex-husband found me there as well. I repeatedly asked my landlord to release me from my lease because it was unsafe for me to live there, but my landlord denied my request each time, often in a threatening or intimidating manner. He once told me that he would be "more than happy to take me to court in the same way that my ex-husband did."

During my time in the shelter, I lost my job after disclosing to my boss that my ex-husband had been stalking me, including at work. I disclosed this to my landlord and again asked to be let free from the lease, and he again denied. He then turned around and sued me for eviction, while I was in the shelter. I wouldn't even have known this had it not been for my next door neighbor who sent me pictures of the documents that were posted on my front door.

I have been in legal proceedings with my landlord ever since.

Today, I live in an apartment style facility with my children for women who come from similar backgrounds, as it is designed with extra safety measures in mind. It is technically considered "transitional housing" because it is designed as a safe space for those of us who have endured what I have endured, along with their children. I fear that the eviction filed by my landlord will haunt me when it comes time for me to leave this facility and find housing again.

I urge you as Senators to please recognize that victims of domestic violence who rent their homes often need more protections than are currently provided under Pennsylvania's

Landlord/Tenant Law. You must understand, as lawmakers, that certain situations call for changes to the law. Cases like mine, where a woman is simply trying to leave the depths of familial Hell to protect herself and her children, show that the law needs to change to provide some basic protections for domestic violence victims. In my case, I felt like I was victimized a second time by a landlord, who took advantage of the current law to profit from me, because he felt that the law entitled him to do it. Victims of domestic violence should not have to battle with their landlords like this while they're already in one of the worst battles of their life.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you for listening.

Ashley Butler