

March 5, 2024

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The Honorable Nick Frentz
Chair, Energy, Environment, and Climate Committee

The Honorable Andrew Mathews
Ranking Minority Leader, Energy, Environment, and Climate Committee

Dear Chair Frentz, Ranking Minority Leader Mathews, and Members of the Committee:

The University of Minnesota Student Legal Service offers legal advice, representation, and education that supports to University of Minnesota-Twin Cities student success. I am reaching out to request support for SF 4749 to promote utility billing transparency and to reduce housing insecurity for student renters.

One of the largest areas of work in our office is that of housing disputes. As part of my work as a housing attorney, I host education sessions and review hundreds of leases each year to help students in the apartment selection process. Students often note that the utility provision of each lease is the most confusing part of their lease. Many of the apartment buildings near our campus are owed by corporate out-of-town landlords who use a submetering system and a third-party billing service to charge for utilities. The lease is often ambiguous on how renters are charged, and what to expect for a monthly cost. Some other landlords in our area use a differently confusing system where the landlord sends a Venmo or CashApp request for each renter's "portion" of a duplex or triplex's utilities (without providing a copy of the bill).

Regardless of the system, the main complaint we hear is the lack of transparency in utility billing and the lack of redress to investigate when they feel they have been accidentally overcharged. Students, who are often new renters, are shocked when there is added fees for administrative costs for utilities, and when utility bills fluctuate wildly during winter months. Students also feel like they are left without redress when they have questions about their bill. Too often, there is no meaningful way for a student to contest a bill or find a way to check for accuracy of a submeter. When students receive a "surprise" utility bill or high fees, the cost of the bill can cause them significant stress and financial strain. And if a student can't pay the unexpected (or disputed) cost, the student risks an eviction being filed against them for failure to pay utilities.

SF 4749 will benefit all renters, including new renters and low-income renters like many college students. The much-needed regulations related to consumer transparency and redress measures, budget billing, and ability to investigate whether or not a submeter is properly working will help promote transparency and reduce housing insecurity in Minnesota. As such, I strongly urge your support of SF 4749. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Shana Tomenes".

Shana Tomenes
Staff Attorney
Student Legal Service
stomenes@umn.edu