

Senator Champion's legislation adds protections for tenants who are victims of violence

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Senator Bobby Joe Champion (DFL-Minneapolis) co-authored legislation to remove barriers for tenant-victims to break a lease if necessary for their safety, prohibits eviction because the tenant was a victim of violence, and extends protections to tenant-victims of sexual assault and stalking.

Seven years ago the legislature adopted a law allowing tenants who were victims of violence to break their lease under three conditions: the tenant was in imminent fear of domestic violence, has a court order, and pays the equivalent of one month of rent as liquidated damages. This was designed to eliminate the impossible choice tenants faced of fleeing for safety and breaching the lease, or staying and risking further violence. However, some of the language in the original bill has caused problems for victims seeking protection under that statute.

"This law changes that. Under current law, only victims of domestic violence were covered," said Sen. Champion. "The bill extends protections currently available to victims of domestic violence to victims of sexual assault and stalking."

Additionally, in current law the only way for a victim to break a lease is to provide a statement of domestic violence and issue either an Order for Protection or a No-Contact Order. Often, obtaining either can be unsafe so victims seek assistance from law enforcement, domestic violence advocates, health care professionals, or sexual assault counselors, but the documents those groups provide victims are insufficient to break a lease. This bill would make those documents qualify.

The third barrier in current law is the requirement to provide one month's rent to break the lease. This provision is also often a financial obstacle for victims. "Current law was a good start, but we needed to expand the scope of the bill to include victims of sexual assault and stalking," Sen. Champion said. "I am hopeful this bill will better protect victims."