

City of Philadelphia



(Bill No. 250329-AA)

AN ORDINANCE

Amending Chapter 9-3900 of The Philadelphia Code, entitled “Property Licenses and Owner Accountability,” to clarify licensing requirements, authorize the Department to create a Proactive Inspection program, require public reporting related to Code compliance, and establish remedies, damages, and protections for tenants, all under certain terms and conditions.

THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA HEREBY ORDAINS:

SECTION 1. Legislative Findings. Council finds that:

(1) A safe, habitable, and well-maintained home is a fundamental necessity for health, stability, and economic mobility. Yet, too many rental properties in Philadelphia fail to meet basic standards of habitability. Approximately 40% of Philadelphia rental homes need repairs and 30-45% of rental units operate without proper licensing, exposing tenants to unsafe, unfit, and imminently dangerous conditions.

(2) Philadelphia is trending toward a majority-renter city, with approximately half of all households currently renting their homes. More than half of these renters are cost-burdened, paying more than 30% of their income toward rent, limiting their ability to absorb additional housing instability or pursue legal remedies when conditions deteriorate.

(3) Existing enforcement mechanisms rely heavily on tenant complaints, placing the burden on tenants to identify, report, and pursue remedies for violations, often at personal risk. This reactive system allows serious code violations to persist undetected and unaddressed for extended periods. Furthermore, tenants consistently face retaliation for speaking out about unsafe conditions.

(4) A majority of tenants lack access to legal representation or the financial means to enforce their rights, resulting in widespread under-enforcement of existing housing standards and allowing non-compliant landlords to continue collecting rent despite failing to maintain habitable properties. In eviction court, 80-85% of landlords have legal representation while only 5-8% of tenants do.

(5) The current rental licensing system does not adequately ensure ongoing compliance with housing standards, nor does it provide sufficient transparency to tenants regarding the condition and legal status of their housing.

(6) Strengthening licensing requirements, establishing proactive inspections, improving transparency, and creating meaningful enforcement mechanisms, including a private right of

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action, are necessary to ensure that all rental housing meets basic standards of safety and habitability.

(7) Tenant advocates report a myriad of eviction filings in Philadelphia Municipal Court, and in many cases, eviction judgments entered against tenants, for properties where there are open code violations and deficiencies in rental licenses and certificates of rental suitability.

(8) It is the intent of Council to shift from a reactive, complaint-driven system to a proactive and accountable framework that ensures compliance before harm occurs, empowers tenants to enforce their rights, and aligns economic incentives so that bad actor landlords cannot continue to profit from unsafe or unlawful conditions.

(9) These reforms are necessary to protect public health, reduce displacement, and promote housing stability in Philadelphia's housing system.

SECTION 2. Title 9 of The Philadelphia Code is hereby amended to read as follows:

TITLE 9. REGULATION OF BUSINESSES, TRADES AND PROFESSIONS

* * *

CHAPTER 9-3900. PROPERTY LICENSES AND OWNER ACCOUNTABILITY

* * *

§ 9-3901. General Provisions.

* * *

(2) Application and Issuance. In addition to the provisions set forth in Subcode A of Title 4, the following provisions shall also apply to licenses required by this Chapter:

(a) An applicant for a new license or the renewal of a license shall complete an application provided by the Department. *The license shall be considered effective from the date specified on the license.* The application shall contain the following information, and such other information as the Department may require:

* * *

(b) *An applicant shall not be eligible for a new rental license or renewal, nor shall [T]he Department [shall] issue or renew a license [if] unless it finds:*

* * *

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(d) *If a license is issued while an appeal of a violation is pending, the relevant violation is affirmed on appeal, and all relevant appeals have been exhausted, the Department may suspend the license.*

(e) *The owner shall, within 7 days of receipt, either post the results of any appeal covered by this Section in a conspicuous place clearly visible to all impacted tenants or deliver it to all impacted tenants either personally or by first class mail.*

* * *

(4) Non-compliance, Private Right of Action and Suspension. In addition to the provisions for license suspension set forth in Subcode A of Title 4, the following provisions shall also apply to licenses required by this Chapter:

(a) The Department is authorized to immediately suspend a license if a property is deemed unfit or unsafe or imminently dangerous.

(b) *Any owner who is required to obtain or renew a rental license shall, within 7 days of receipt, provide a copy of that rental license, together with a restatement of subsection 9-3901(4)(h), to all tenants in the following manner. The owner shall either (i) post the rental license and restatement of subsection 9-3901(4)(h) in a conspicuous place clearly visible to all tenants or (ii) deliver a copy of the rental license, together with a restatement of subsection 9-3901(4)(h), to each tenant either personally or by certified mail. For properties containing one (1) or two (2) dwelling units, the owner may also provide the rental license and restatement of subsection 9-3901(4)(h) by e-mail, provided that the tenant has affirmatively consented in writing to receive such notices by e-mail, has provided an e-mail address for that purpose, and has not revoked such consent. A tenant may revoke consent to receive notices by e-mail at any time by written notice to the owner, and upon such revocation, the owner shall provide notice by another method authorized under this Section.*

(c) *Any owner who receives a notice of violation from the Department stating that (i) a property or unit is unsafe, unfit, or imminently dangerous as defined in Sections PM-108, PM-109, or PM-110, or (ii) a property or unit violates the Philadelphia Fire Code, shall provide notice to all impacted tenants by posting a copy of the notice of violation, and any subsequent inspection reports or appeals, in a conspicuous location on the premises clearly visible to impacted tenants, or by delivering such notice personally or by first class mail.*

Such notice shall be provided no later than twenty-four (24) hours prior to the deadline for correction stated in the notice of violation. If the violation is fully corrected within the time permitted by the Department, no tenant notice shall be required under this subsection.

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(d) *Any owner who receives a notice of license suspension shall, within 7 days of receipt, either post a copy of that notice in a conspicuous place clearly visible to all impacted tenants or deliver it to all impacted tenants either personally or by first class mail.*

[(b)] (e) The Department is authorized to suspend a license at the request of the District Attorney with respect to any property subject to forfeiture to the Commonwealth under the provisions of 42 Pa. C.S. § 6801 or other applicable law.

[(c)] (f) A license issued may be suspended by the Department for failure to comply with the requirements of this Code after a re-inspection has been made to determine compliance pursuant to Section A-503.1 of Subcode A, *provided an appeal is not in the process of being reviewed*, or for failure to pay any fine and/or cost imposed under this Chapter or Subcode A, and such suspension shall continue until there has been compliance and until any unpaid fines and costs have been paid.

[(d)] (g) The Department shall provide written notice and an opportunity for a hearing prior to any suspension of a license under this Section.

[(e)] (h) Non-compliance. Any owner who fails to obtain a *valid* rental license as required by Section 9-3902, *who fails to obtain a valid* [to comply with Section 9-3903 regarding a] Certificate of Rental Suitability *as required by Section 9-3903, who fails to correct code violations as described in Section 9-3903(2)(d)*, or whose rental license has been suspended shall be denied the right to recover possession of the premises or to collect rent during or for the period of noncompliance or during or for the period of license suspension. In any action for eviction or collection of rent, the owner shall attach a copy of the license, *copies of all Certificates of Rental Suitability required by Section 9-3903 and copies of all code violations issued with respect to the rental unit and/or property during the relevant tenancy.*

[(f)] (i) Private Right of Action. Any [tenant of any property] *person* subject to the provisions of this Chapter shall have the right to bring an action against the owner of such property to compel compliance with this Chapter *and to seek relief as provided in this Section.* [Such private right of action neither limits nor expands the rights of private parties to pursue any legal rights and claims they may possess under a written agreement or at Common Law.] *A prevailing tenant shall be entitled to the following remedies:*

(.1) Compensatory damages for any harm caused by any non-compliance or liquidated damages in the amount of \$1,000 per violation, whichever is greater. Liquidated damages under this subsection are intended to make the tenant whole and to compensate the tenant for collateral harms suffered as a result of the violation and for the tenant's time and effort enforcing the rights afforded to the tenant under this Chapter. Each separate occurrence or instance of a prohibited action shall constitute a separate violation; A continuing violation arising from the same underlying condition shall constitute a single violation and shall not be deemed a separate violation for each day it continues.

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(.2) For violations of Section 9-3901(4)(h), abatement and refund of rent for any period during which rent was collected and the owner was noncompliant as defined in that Section;

(.3) Such other relief, including injunctive relief, as the court may deem appropriate; and

(.4) Reasonable attorney's fees and costs.

(j) Safe Harbor. In a private action pursuant to this Section, an owner shall not be deemed non-compliant for any period in which the owner can demonstrate, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the safe harbor provisions set below apply.

(.1) Delayed re-inspection of premises. An owner shall not be deemed non-compliant for purposes of this Section for any period during which the owner's inability to obtain or maintain a rental license or Certificate of Rental Suitability results primarily from a delayed re-inspection by the Department. An owner shall be deemed compliant as of the date the owner completed the required corrective action and took all reasonable steps to obtain or maintain the required license or Certificate of Rental Suitability, provided that the owner demonstrates by a preponderance of the evidence that:

(.a) The owner timely corrected the underlying condition or deficiency;

(.b) The owner timely applied for, renewed, or sought reinstatement of the rental license or Certificate of Rental Suitability and requested in writing any required inspections;

(.c) Any failure to obtain or maintain the license or Certificate during the relevant period was due primarily to the delayed re-inspection by the City;

(.d) The owner provided notice of the completed repair to the tenant(s); and

(.e) A subsequent inspection confirms the condition was corrected.

(.2) Pending appeal of certain taxes, liens, fines, and fees resulting in outstanding balances. An owner shall not be deemed non-compliant for purposes of this Section for any period during which a timely appeal is pending and not yet adjudicated regarding taxes, liens, fines, and fees unrelated to a Title 4 violation that form an outstanding balance on the owner's business tax account that would otherwise prevent license issuance, provided that the owner demonstrates by a preponderance of the evidence that:

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(.a) In the case of a violation that leads to a tax, lien, fine or fee, the underlying violation was not issued under Title 4 and does not involve conditions classified as Unsafe, Unfit, or Imminently Dangerous;

(.b) The outstanding balance is the sole reason preventing the license from being issued or renewed;

(.c) The owner filed a timely administrative or judicial appeal of the violation or tax clearance determination, as applicable, in accordance with governing procedures;

(.d) The owner has not failed to take any required interim corrective actions within the owner's control; and

(.e) The underlying violation or condition is subsequently dismissed or withdrawn upon adjudication, such that the outstanding balance would not have prevented license issuance; and

(.f) Within five (5) days of filing such appeal, the owner provides written notice to all impacted tenants stating that an appeal has been filed, identifying the nature of any outstanding balance, and explaining that the basis for any alleged non-compliance is subject to adjudication; such notice shall be provided in accordance with this Section's notice requirements.

(.g) In any action for eviction, recovery of possession, or collection of rent or other charges relating to a property subject to this Section, the owner shall attach to the initial filing a copy of any pending appeal described in this subsection and shall affirmatively disclose the existence and status of such appeal. Failure to attach and disclose as required by this paragraph shall render the filing defective for purposes of this Section until cured.

For purposes of this subsection, if the appeal is denied in full, the period of non-compliance shall be deemed to run from the original cure date.

(.3) Renewal of Rental License. An owner shall not be deemed noncompliant for purposes of this Section solely for failure to timely renew a rental license during the fifteen (15) days immediately following the expiration of such license, provided that the owner obtains a valid renewal within such period.

(.4) No provision of this Section shall limit an owner's ability to bring a claim for property damage or breach of contract.

§ 9-3902. Rental Licenses.

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(1) Required.

(a) The owner of any dwelling unit, multiple family dwelling, rooming house, dormitory, hotel, one-family dwelling, two-family dwelling, or rooming unit let for occupancy must obtain a rental license. No person shall collect rent with respect to any property that is required to be licensed pursuant to this Section unless a valid rental license has been issued for the property *and has not expired or been suspended*.

§ 9-3903. Certificate of Rental Suitability; Required Tenant Documents.

(1) Required.

(a) The owner of any property for which a rental license is required shall, at the inception of each tenancy, provide to the tenant a Certificate of Rental Suitability that was issued by the Department no more than sixty days prior to the inception of the tenancy. The owner shall at the same time provide the tenant a copy of the owner's attestation to the suitability of the dwelling unit as received by the Department pursuant to subsection 9-3903(2)(b)(.3), and a copy of the "City of Philadelphia Partners for Good Housing Handbook" issued by the Department, or such other document as the Department shall require. The Certificate of Rental Suitability may be for either an individual dwelling unit, or for the entire building in which the unit is located.

(b) Exception. The provisions of subsection [9-3903\(1\)\(a\)](#) shall not apply with respect to any rental to a tenant who is a member of the owner's family.

(c) *The owner of any property for which a rental license is required shall, at the time of filing an eviction action, provide a Certificate of Rental Suitability to the tenant and to the court that was issued by the Department no more than thirty days prior to the date of enrollment. Any owner who fails to comply with this subsection shall be denied the right to file for eviction or obtain possession of the property.*

(d) *At any point during a tenancy, a tenant may request a Certificate of Rental Suitability from the owner, provided that a tenant may not request more than one such Certificate within any ninety (90) day period. Within ten (10) days of receiving a tenant request, an owner shall provide to the tenant a Certificate of Rental Suitability issued by the Department no more than thirty days prior to the request. Any owner who fails to comply with this subsection shall be denied the right to collect rent until a Certificate of Rental Suitability is provided to the tenant. The Safe Harbor Provision in Section 3-901(4)(j) shall also apply to this subsection.*

(2) Application and Issuance.

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(a) Applications for a Certificate of Rental Suitability shall be made on forms provided by the Department.

(b) The Department shall issue a Certificate of Rental Suitability only after it determines that:

(.1) The owner of the property has obtained all required licenses with respect to the property, including a rental license.

(.2) There are no outstanding violation notices under this Code with respect to the property, except with respect to violations for which there is a pending appeal of which the owner has notified the Department in a manner prescribed by the Department.

Exception: The Department of Licenses and Inspections may promulgate regulations regarding conditions under which Certificates of Rental Suitability may be issued, despite violations of Section PM-108.1.3 (Unsafe shared retaining walls).

(.3) The owner of the premises to be leased acknowledges the obligation to provide a fit and habitable property and states that (1) all fire protection and smoke detection equipment for the premises are present and in proper operating order in accordance with all applicable requirements of The Philadelphia Code and regulations and standards adopted thereunder; (2) the operating systems are working properly to provide a fit and habitable condition; and (3) *that the premises are free of unfit, unsafe, or imminently dangerous conditions, as defined by Sections PM-108, PM-109, and PM-110; and (4) the owner will continue to maintain all fire protection and smoke detection equipment for the premises in accordance with all applicable requirements of The Philadelphia Code and regulations and standards adopted thereunder, will continue to maintain the operating systems in proper working order, will continue to ensure that the property is free of any unfit, unsafe, and imminently dangerous conditions as defined by Sections PM-108, PM-109, and PM-110, and will continue to maintain the property in a fit and habitable condition.*

(c) The Certificate shall set forth the applicable rental license number for the property, the date of the last inspection conducted by the Department (where applicable) and the applicable zoning designation, and shall set out the process by which a tenant may request a further inspection of the property by the Department.

(d) Failure by the owner to correct *unsafe, unfit, or imminently dangerous* code violations *as defined by Sections PM-108, PM-109, and PM-110* [covered by subsection (2)(b)(.3)] within thirty (30) days of receiving a notice of violation, or sooner as indicated by the Department, shall be considered to be noncompliance with this Section, *so long as the owner has not timely appealed the notice of violation.*

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(.1) *In an action for eviction or collection of rent, the owner shall have the burden of demonstrating compliance with the requirements for issuance of a Certificate of Rental Suitability during the relevant tenancy.*

(.2) *Where a notice of violation is timely appealed and subsequently affirmed, the owner shall be deemed in noncompliance with this Section as of the cure date specified on the notice of violation.*

(e) *Proactive Inspection Program. The Department is authorized to establish a Proactive Inspection Program in order to inspect all residential rental properties and units registered to a rental license pursuant to Section 9-3902 (“Rental Licenses”), identified as Residential Dwellings or Rooming Houses / Boarding Houses, on a regular cycle by July 2030, provided that such inspections are feasible in the interests of health and safety.*

(f) *Reporting Requirements.*

(.1) *The Department shall prepare an annual report, and shall provide Council with, and make publicly available, such reports pursuant to the schedule set forth in paragraph (.2) Such reports shall include, but are not limited to, the following:*

(.a) *The current status of the Proactive Inspection Program, an assessment of progress toward the goal of routine proactive inspections for all units registered to a rental license pursuant to Section 9-3902 (“Rental Licenses”), identified as Residential Dwellings or Rooming Houses / Boarding Houses, and a plan for developing the program over the next calendar year.*

(.b) *The total number of rental inspections performed during the past calendar year per zip code, and whether each inspection was in response to a complaint or a result of the Proactive Inspection Program.*

(.c) *An overview of inspections performed in response to complaints, including the number and type of complaints received per zip code, number and type of complaints responded to per zip code, the number and type of violations found as a result of complaints per zip code, and the average response time for each type of complaint.*

(.d) *The total number of all notices of intent to cease operations and cease operations orders for residential rental properties.*

(.e) *A list of all residential rental property owners and addresses with an open Unfit, Unsafe, or Imminently Dangerous violation or a Cease Operations order, as defined by Sections PM-108, PM-109, PM-110, and A-505.*

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(.2) *The first report shall be provided to Council no later than December 31, 2027. Thereafter, an annual report shall be provided to Council no later than June 30 each year.*

SECTION 3. This Ordinance shall become effective November 1, 2026.

Explanation:

[Brackets] indicate matter deleted.

Italics indicate new matter added.

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CERTIFICATION: This is a true and correct copy of the original Bill, Passed by the City Council on April 23, 2026. The Bill was Signed by the Mayor on May 7, 2026.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Elizabeth McCollum". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Elizabeth" and last name "McCollum" clearly distinguishable.

Elizabeth McCollum
Chief Clerk of the City Council