**A** **BILL**

TO AMEND THE CODE OF LAWS OF SOUTH CAROLINA, 1976, BY ADDING SECTION 27‑37‑45 SO AS TO PROVIDE FOR EXPEDITED EJECTMENTS OF CERTAIN TENANTS BY LANDLORDS; AND TO AMEND SECTION 8‑21‑1010, RELATING TO MAGISTRATES’ FEES, SO AS TO PROVIDE A FEE FOR FILING AN EXPEDITED EJECTMENT.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina:

SECTION 1. Chapter 37, Title 27 of the 1976 Code is amended by adding:

“Section 27‑37‑45. (A) For purposes of this section:

(1)(a) ‘Malicious damage to property’ means the intentional, wrongful, or deliberately harmful infliction of substantial destruction, defacing, damaging, impairment, or removal of any part of the premises by the tenant, a member of his household, or his guest without just cause, excuse, or legal justification. For purposes of this section, damage to premises is ‘substantial’ if it exceeds two times the security deposit. ‘Malicious damage to property’ does not include repairs or improvements to the leased premises.

(b) ‘Malicious damage to property’ does not include damage to the property that occurs as a result of one or more incidents of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking against the tenant or a member of the tenant’s household.

(2)(a) ‘Significant threat to safety’ means causing or attempting to cause physical harm or injury to the health and safety of the landlord or his agents, the tenant and members of his household or guests, or other tenants that is caused by a tenant, a member of his household, or his guest, under circumstances reasonably creating fear of imminent peril, such as:

(i) homicide or physical assault to inflict bodily harm; or

(ii) illegal use of a firearm or other weapon.

(b) ‘Significant threat to safety’ does not include actual or threatened criminal domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking toward a tenant or a member of a tenant’s household.

(B) A landlord or his agent must not apply for an ejectment as provided in this section based substantially on the status of the tenant, a member of the tenant’s household, or a guest as a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking. For purposes of this section, evidence of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking provided to the landlord or his agent or to the magistrate may include:

(1) law enforcement, court, or federal agency records or files;

(2) documentation from a domestic violence or sexual assault program; or

(3) documentation from a religious, medical, or other professional.

(C)(1) For residential rental agreements, the tenant may be ejected by the procedures in this section upon application of the landlord or his agent only when the tenant, a member of his household, or a guest causes:

(a) malicious damage to property; or

(b) significant threat to safety.

(2) The landlord or his agent seeking relief under this section bears the burden of proof by a preponderance of the evidence that the actions of a tenant, a member of the tenant’s household, or a guest meets the definition of ‘malicious damage to property’ or ‘significant threat to safety’.

(D)(1) In an application for an ejectment action brought under this section, the landlord or his agent who initiates the action must file an affidavit stating specific facts and instances to support the action. The fee for initiating this action is as provided in Section 8‑21‑1010(15) and the magistrate or his clerk must collect this fee.

(2) Within twenty‑four hours or no later than the next business day after the filing of an application to proceed with an action for ejectment pursuant to this section, the magistrate must review the application and affidavit in an ex parte hearing without giving the defendant notice of the hearing. If the landlord or his agent shows by a preponderance of the evidence sufficient supporting facts in the application and affidavit to meet the requirements of this section, the magistrate shall authorize the action to proceed with service provided in subsection (E).

(3) If the magistrate determines that the landlord or his agent initiating the action did so intentionally and in bad faith and without sufficient basis under the requirements of this section, the magistrate may impose a civil penalty of up to five hundred dollars for abuse of the expedited process. This civil penalty must not be recorded as a criminal matter and is not subject to assessments. Failure by the applicant to pay the civil penalty makes the applicant liable for contempt of court.

(E)(1) The copy of the rule to show cause may be served in the same manner as is provided by law for the service of the summons in actions pending in the court of common pleas or magistrates courts of this State or as provided by item (2). A law enforcement officer or constable is responsible only for the attempts at service as provided in this item and item (2)(a).

(2) When service as provided in item (1) has been attempted unsuccessfully two times in the manner described in subitem (a), a copy of the rule may be served by affixing it, the supporting affidavit, and documentation of the two service attempts to the most conspicuous part of the premises and mailing a copy of the rule in the manner described in subitem (b).

(a) Each of the two attempts to serve the defendant must be separated by a minimum of twenty‑four hours and must occur at times of day separated by a minimum of eight hours. The service attempts shall take place after the magistrate authorizes the action to proceed with service as provided in subsection (C)(2). The person attempting to serve the rule must document the date and time of the attempts by affidavit or by certificate in the case of a law enforcement officer. On the first unsuccessful attempt to serve the rule, a copy of the rule, the supporting affidavit, and the documentation of the service attempt must be affixed to the most conspicuous part of the premises and the ten‑day period for the tenant to appear and show cause provided in subsection (E) begins the following day. On the second unsuccessful attempt to serve the rule, a copy of the rule, the supporting affidavit, and the documentation of the two attempts to serve the rule must be attached when it is affixed to the most conspicuous part of the premises.

(b) For mailing by ordinary mail to be considered to complete service under this item, it must be accomplished by placing a copy of the rule in an envelope in the presence of the clerk of the magistrates court. The clerk is responsible for verifying that the envelope is addressed to the defendant at the address shown in the rule as the rental premises of the defendant or another address for receipt of mail furnished in writing by the tenant to the landlord, that the envelope contains the necessary documents, and that the clerk has placed the sealed and stamped envelope in the United States mail on the same day that the ex parte hearing described in subsection (C) occurs. The clerk’s verification must be made a part of the record in the case, and service by ordinary mail is not considered complete without the clerk’s verification. A fee as provided for in Section 8‑21‑1010(14) must be collected by the magistrate or his clerk for the verification and mailing in this item.

(3) Mailing of the rule constitutes service when the requirements of subitems (a) and (b) of item (2) have been met. If these requirements have been met, the specified time period for the tenant to show cause why he should not be ejected as provided in subsection (C) begins to run on the day after service of the rule to show cause as provided in item (1) or item (2)(b).

(F) If the tenant fails to appear or contact the magistrate and show cause within the ten calendar days following the first attempt at service as provided in subsection (E), then the magistrate shall issue a warrant of ejectment and the tenant shall be ejected by his regular or special constable or by the sheriff of the county.

(G) Nothing in this section may be construed to proscribe or limit any other rights a landlord or tenant may have under other statutes or by law.

(H) The provisions of this section shall be strictly construed.”

SECTION 2. Section 8‑21‑1010(A) of the 1976 Code is amended by adding an appropriately numbered item at the end to read:

“(15) for filing an application for an expedited ejectment as provided in Section 27‑37‑45(C)(1), fifty dollars.”

SECTION 3. This act takes effect upon approval by the Governor.

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