Good morning, Senator Rahman, Representative DeGraw and members of the Planning & Development Committee. My name is Mark Wilson, I live in Waterbury, CT, I currently serve as the Manager of Neighborhood and Commercial Development, and I previously served as the Interim Deputy Director of Housing Code Enforcement in the City of New Haven.

I am here to testify in support of House Bill 6391 An Act Increasing Penalties for The Violation of Municipal Ordinances.

I feel an increase in the fines a municipality can levy is a big step in the right direction, particularly when the violations effect the lives of our residents.

While serving as the interim Deputy Director of Housing Code Enforcement, I witnessed firsthand the deplorable conditions that many of the residents in New Haven are subject to. Early last year I responded to an afterhours no heat emergency call at a four-family dwelling. I arrived to find all four families with no heat and living in what I would describe as sub-human conditions. There were holes in the roof, missing windows, non-working toilets, leaking plumbing, faulty electrical wiring, non-working appliances and no smoke or carbon monoxide detectors. Our office immediately reached out to the landlord, who lived out of State, and when we described the condition of the property, they responded that they were not interested nor were they going to make any repairs and that we should begin the legal process. Less than a week later, our office responded to another after hours call for burst water pipes due to inadequate heat. The responding inspector found 3 families living in units with no heat, the electrical utilities in two units had been disconnected due to non-payment, a vacant unit with burst pipes and no access to the water supply to shut them off. As it turned out, this property was also owned by the same landlord, who when reached told us to add this building to the legal process as well. The City was forced to uproot these families and relocate them while the legal process was played out. NO ONE SHOULD HAVE TO LIVE UNDER THESE CONDITIONS.

Most of the housing code violations we encounter are not this egregious. Many can be abated rather quickly and generally avoided altogether with a proactive maintenance plan. Implementing such a plan across hundreds of rental units can be challenging but doable. We have many large landlords in New Haven who do a fine job in maintaining their properties. But there are, however, some landlords who are more likely to chance gambling on paying a small fine rather than implementing a preventive maintenance plan, because simply put, the payoff is bigger. If the stakes were raised and
the cost to play was much higher, we believe that more landlords would come to see the overall
good in maintaining their properties an if not, the potential cost of failing to do so.

The goal of housing code enforcement and this bill should be voluntary compliance not
punishment.

Many of the larger landlords in New Haven have been summoned to court on multiple occasions,
they have been fined multiple times for multiple violations only to gladly pay the maximum $250
fine per violation. For many these are simply minor bumps in the road, considered as just another
small expense in the cost of doing business. This is evidenced by their willingness to retain high
priced attorneys who stay at the ready to represent them.

These housing code violations are infractions, not misdemeanors. Pleading guilty and paying a fine
does not lead to a criminal conviction, does not lead to a criminal record, nor the stigma attached
these. Paying a meager fine of $250.00 for these violations that effect the daily lives of our residents
is not enough. We must do more. I feel the **MINIMUM** fines should be raised to $1,000.00 per
violation.

This Bill will empower municipalities with the leverage needed, when necessary, to force negligent
landlords to step up and do the right thing. For far too long our ordinances have been viewed as
having a lot of bark but no bite.

To be clear the mission of the City of New Haven’s Livable City Initiative is to protect the health,
safety, and welfare of all our citizens, tenants and landlords alike. All our residents have the right to
decent, safe, and sanitary housing. I include both tenants and landlords as our inspections are carried
out to protect the welfare of both. Unfortunately, due to the dichotomy that generally exist between
an absent and willful landlord and their tenant, it may seem at times that we are siding with the
tenants, when in fact our position is and will always be that safe and decent housing units are
available to all.

I urge you to vote in favor of HOUSE BILL 6391.

Again, I would like to thank The Planning and Development Committee for the opportunity to
speak on this issue and to offer my testimony.