



NEW JERSEY LAW REVISION COMMISSION

Draft Tentative Report Addressing The

New Jersey Safe Housing Act's Application to Non-physical Harm

July 8, 2024

The New Jersey Law Revision Commission is required to “[c]onduct a continuous examination of the general and permanent statutory law of this State and the judicial decisions construing it” and to propose to the Legislature revisions to the statutes to “remedy defects, reconcile conflicting provisions, clarify confusing language and eliminate redundant provisions.” *N.J.S. 1:12A-8*.

This Report is distributed to advise interested persons of the Commission's tentative recommendations and to notify them of the opportunity to submit comments. Comments should be received by the Commission no later than **September 16, 2024**.

The Commission will consider these comments before making its final recommendations to the Legislature. The Commission often substantially revises tentative recommendations as a result of the comments it receives. If you approve of the Report, please inform the Commission so that your approval can be considered along with other comments. Please send comments concerning this Report or direct any related inquiries, to:

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Project Summary¹

The New Jersey Law Revision Commission previously engaged in a substantial project concerning New Jersey’s Landlord and Tenant law after which a Final Report was released in 2012.² Although introduced once in bill form in a prior legislative session,³ that Commission project has not yet been enacted.

The Commission’s 2012 Report in this area incorporated the New Jersey Safe Housing Act (“SHA”). Commission Staff recently reviewed the 2015 Revised Uniform Residential Landlord and Tenant Act, with an emphasis on Article 11 of that Act, to determine whether New Jersey is employing the “best practices” in this area of law.⁴ The review included the Uniform Law Commission (“ULC”) Act, New Jersey’s statutes, and a preliminary review of relevant New Jersey case law.

The SHA, found at N.J.S. 46:8-9.4 *et seq.*, was enacted to supplement the procedures that were available to “a victim of domestic violence who wishes to terminate a residential lease.”⁵ The Act enables “a victim of domestic violence to terminate a lease agreement by providing a landlord with written notice accompanied by evidence of domestic violence.”⁶ The specific type of “written notice” required under N.J.S. 46:8-9.6 must support “an imminent threat of serious physical harm” if the tenant or child of the tenant remains in the leased premises.⁷

The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (“PDVA”), N.J.S. 2C:25-17 *et seq.*, is incorporated by reference in the SHA by N.J.S. 46:8-9.6(b)(1).⁸ Pursuant to the PDVA at N.J.S. 2C:25-19, “domestic violence” is defined as the occurrence of one or more of nineteen different acts.⁹ Among the acts are “[h]arassment[,]” “[s]talking[,]” and “[c]yber harassment[.]”¹⁰ Acts that could constitute “domestic violence” under the PDVA are not limited to “an imminent threat of serious physical harm[,]” as required the SHA at N.J.S. 46:8-9.6 for early lease termination.¹¹

The Commission undertook a project in this area to assess whether the SHA might benefit from modification to indicate that harm from domestic violence is broader than just “serious physical harm,” and may include psychological, economic, and other harms.

¹ Preliminary research and drafting was conducted by Jennifer Weitz, Esq., as Counsel to the Commission during her tenure with the NJLRC.

² N.J. LAW REVISION COMM’N., FINAL REPORT RELATING TO LANDLORD AND TENANT LAW (2012), <https://www.njlrc.org/projects/2020/1/31/landlord-tenant?rq=landlord> (last visited July 2, 2024).

³ A.B. 3693, 2016 Leg., 217th Sess. (May 19, 2016).

⁴ REVISED UNIF. RESIDENTIAL LANDLORD AND TENANT ACT (2015), Pref. Note. Available at www.uniformlaws.org (last visited July 2, 2024).

⁵ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.4 *et seq.* (West 2024); N.J. Sen. Comm. State., A.B. 2871 (Oct. 2, 2008).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.6 (West 2024) (emphasis added).

⁸ This reference is for providing evidence of a permanent restraining order issued by a court pursuant to the PDVA. N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.6(b)(1) (West 2024); N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-17 *et seq.* (West 2024).

⁹ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-19 (West 2024).

¹⁰ *Id.*; See N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-19(a)(13), (14), and (19) (West 2024).

¹¹ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.6 (West 2024).

Statutes Considered

N.J.S. 46:8-9.6 of the SHA provides:

The tenant may terminate any lease of a residential property that has been leased and used by the tenant solely for the purpose of providing a dwelling place for the tenant, or for the tenant's family, prior to the expiration date thereof, if the tenant fulfills all requirements and procedures as established by P.L.2008, c. 111 (C.46:8-9.4 et al.) and provides the landlord with:

- a. written notice that the tenant or a child of the tenant faces an imminent threat of serious physical harm from another named person if the tenant remains on the leased premises; and
- b. any of the following:
 - (1) a certified copy of a permanent restraining order issued by a court pursuant to section 13 of “The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 1991,” P.L.1991, c. 261 (C.2C:25-29), and protecting the tenant from the person named in the written notice;
 - (2) a certified copy of a permanent restraining order from another jurisdiction, issued pursuant to the jurisdiction's laws concerning domestic violence, and protecting the tenant from the person named in the written notice;
 - (3) a law enforcement agency record documenting the domestic violence, or certifying that the tenant or a child of the tenant is a victim of domestic violence;
 - (4) medical documentation of the domestic violence provided by a health care provider;
 - (5) certification, provided by a certified Domestic Violence Specialist, or the director of a designated domestic violence agency, that the tenant or a child of the tenant is a victim of domestic violence; or
 - (6) other documentation or certification, provided by a licensed social worker, that the tenant or a child of the tenant is a victim of domestic violence.¹²

N.J.S. 2C:25-19 of the PDVA provides in relevant part:

a. “Domestic violence” means the occurrence of one or more of the following acts inflicted upon a person protected under this act by an adult or an emancipated minor:

- (1) Homicide N.J.S.2C:11-1 et seq.

¹² *Id.* (emphasis added).

- (2) Assault N.J.S.2C:12-1
- (3) Terroristic threats N.J.S.2C:12-3
- (4) Kidnapping N.J.S.2C:13-1
- (5) Criminal restraint N.J.S.2C:13-2
- (6) False imprisonment N.J.S.2C:13-3
- (7) Sexual assault N.J.S.2C:14-2
- (8) Criminal sexual contact N.J.S.2C:14-3
- (9) Lewdness N.J.S.2C:14-4
- (10) Criminal mischief N.J.S.2C:17-3
- (11) Burglary N.J.S.2C:18-2
- (12) Criminal trespass N.J.S.2C:18-3
- (13) Harassment N.J.S.2C:33-4
- (14) Stalking P.L.1992, c. 209 (C.2C:12-10)
- (15) Criminal coercion N.J.S.2C:13-5
- (16) Robbery N.J.S.2C:15-1
- (17) Contempt of a domestic violence order pursuant to subsection b. of N.J.S.2C:29-9 that constitutes a crime or disorderly persons offense
- (18) Any other crime involving risk of death or serious bodily injury to a person protected under the “Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 1991,” P.L.1991, c. 261 (C.2C:25-17 et al.)
- (19) Cyber-harassment P.L.2013, c. 272 (C.2C:33-4.1)...¹³

* * *

Legislative History and Findings

In 2008, the New Jersey Legislature enacted the New Jersey Safe Housing Act (SHA), amending Title 46 of the New Jersey statutes.¹⁴ The Legislature determined that landlord cooperation is a key component in combating domestic abuse within the State.¹⁵ In its legislative findings, the Legislature noted that the inability to terminate a lease and the associated financial obligations may prevent victims of domestic violence from leaving abusive relationships and seeking help.¹⁶ The Legislature further determined that victims of domestic violence must be allowed to end their lease obligations without damaging their credit and/or rental history, to avoid jeopardizing their ability to secure safe housing in the future.¹⁷

Accordingly, the SHA permits a victim of domestic abuse to terminate a residential lease by providing written notice and evidence of domestic abuse, such as a restraining order or criminal

¹³ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-19(a) (West 2024).

¹⁴ P.L. 2008, c. 223, amending P.L. 1971, c. 223, codified at N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.4 *et seq.* (West 2024).

¹⁵ N.J. Assem. Comm. State., A.B. 2871 (Sept. 15, 2008).

¹⁶ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.5(b) (West 2024).

¹⁷ *Id.*

complaint, to a landlord.¹⁸

The Legislature had previously, in 1991, enacted the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (PDVA).¹⁹ The Legislative findings contained in this earlier Act declared “that domestic violence is a serious crime against society[,]” and that “the intent of the Legislature [is] to assure the victims of domestic violence the maximum protection from abuse the law can provide.”²⁰ In addition to physical abuse, the 1991 legislative findings also recognized emotional, psychological, and financial acts of domestic violence particularly against minors, the elderly, and disabled victims.²¹ In 2016, the Legislature amended N.J.S. 2C:25-19(a) of the PDVA adding “cyber-harassment” to the list of acts constituting “domestic violence.”²²

Background

In 2011, the Uniform Law Commission formed a Drafting Committee to update the Residential Landlord and Tenant Act (“the Act” or “RLTA”) and to specifically address domestic violence and the refund of security deposits.²³ The revised RLTA was approved in 2015.²⁴ Article 11, an amendment to the RLTA, allows for lease terminations in response to acts of domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, or sexual assault.²⁵ It also addresses the rights of landlords with respect to perpetrators of domestic violence who are tenants in the same residence or elsewhere on the premises.²⁶

The RLTA’s “Early Release or Termination of Lease” provision, at section 1102, states in part:

(a) Subject to subsection (e), if a victim of an act of domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, or sexual assault is a tenant or immediate family member and has a reasonable fear of suffering psychological harm or a further act of domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, or sexual assault if the victim continues to reside in the dwelling unit, the tenant, without the necessity of the landlord’s consent, is released from the lease if the tenant gives the landlord a notice....²⁷

Significantly, the RLTA acknowledges that victims of domestic violence reasonably fear different types of harm, including psychological harm.²⁸

¹⁸ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.6(a) (West 2024).

¹⁹ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-17 *et seq.* (West 2024).

²⁰ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-18 (West 2024).

²¹ *Id.*

²² *P.L. 2016, c. 77 § 1, amending P.L. 2015, c. 98, codified at N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-19 (West 2024).*

²³ REVISED UNIF. RESIDENTIAL LANDLORD AND TENANT ACT (2015), Pref. Note. Available at www.uniformlaws.org (last visited July 3, 2024).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.* at § 1102 (emphasis added).

²⁸ *Id.*

Analysis

Currently, New Jersey’s early lease termination provision, found in the SHA at N.J.S. 46:8-9.6, recognizes only the “threat of serious physical harm” in the domestic violence context.²⁹ The plain language of the PDVA at N.J.S. 2C:25-19, however, is broader in scope and recognizes “harassment,” “stalking,” and “cyber-harassment” in its definition of domestic violence.³⁰

- *Relevant Statutes and Cases*

N.J.S. 2C: 25-19 of the PDVA establishes “harassment” pursuant to N.J.S. 2C:33-4 as an act of domestic violence when, “with [the] purpose to harass another,” a person:

- a. Makes, or causes to be made, one or more communications anonymously or at extremely inconvenient hours, or in offensively coarse language, or any other manner likely to cause annoyance or alarm;
- b. Subjects another to striking, kicking, shoving, or other offensive touching, or threatens to do so; or
- c. Engages in any other course of alarming conduct or of repeatedly committed acts with purpose to alarm or seriously annoy such other person....³¹

“Stalking,” pursuant to N.J.S. 2C:12-10, may occur when a person “purposefully or knowingly engages in a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to fear for his safety or the safety of a third person or suffer other emotional distress.”³² The “course of conduct” to which the statute refers may involve “repeatedly maintaining a visual or physical proximity to a person... monitoring, observing, surveilling, threatening, or communicating to or about, a person, or interfering with a person's property; repeatedly committing harassment against a person; or repeatedly conveying, or causing to be conveyed... threats.”³³

“Cyber-harassment,” pursuant to N.J.S. 2C:33-4.1, constitutes domestic violence if a person “threatens to inflict injury or physical harm to, or otherwise commit any crime against, another person or the person’s property; or knowingly sends, posts, comments, requests, suggests, or proposes any lewd, indecent, or obscene material to or about the person with the intent to harm the person.”³⁴

The acts or offenses of “harassment,” “stalking,” and “cyber-harassment,” under the PDVA may be committed without necessarily imposing the “imminent threat of serious physical harm”

²⁹ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.6 (West 2024).

³⁰ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-19 (West 2024).

³¹ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:33-4 (West 2024).

³² N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:12-10(b) (West 2024).

³³ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:12-10(a)(1) (West 2024).

³⁴ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:33-4.1 (West 2024); N.J. Sen. Comm. State., A.B. 1946 (Sept. 26, 2016).

as required under N.J.S. 46:8-9.6.³⁵

New Jersey courts have recognized psychological harm as grounds for a restraining order, noting that acts of harassment, even absent physical abuse, “can cause great emotional harm and psychological trauma.”³⁶

In *H.E.S. v. J.C.S.*, the New Jersey Supreme Court determined that the husband’s acts of hiding video and audio surveillance equipment in the plaintiff-wife’s bedroom could constitute harassment and stalking as domestic violence offenses under a totality of the circumstances review, considering other alleged behavior such as conveying death threats and following the Plaintiff at work.³⁷ The Court emphasized that the defendant-husband’s behavior “could have enhanced plaintiff’s feeling of helplessness and inability to escape.”³⁸ Furthermore, the Court recognized that “[t]he law is clear that acts of actual violence are not required to support a finding of domestic violence.”³⁹

- *Legislative Intent*

The legislative findings included in the PDVA and the SHA indicate a clear focus by the Legislature on the reduction of domestic violence in New Jersey.⁴⁰ The legislative history reveals that both the Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee and the Assembly Housing and Local Government Committee’s statements and amendments to Assembly Bill No. 2871, found at N.J.S. 46:8-9.6, do not mention the word “physical.”⁴¹ Instead, the Assembly Committee stated that “[a]s amended, the bill specifies that the written notice indicate that the tenant fears harm from another person if the tenant remains on the leased premises.”⁴² The Governor’s Message from the day N.J.S. 46:8-9.6 was enacted states that the law “[p]ermits victim[s] of domestic abuse to terminate residential lease[s] under certain circumstances... [and] provides procedure[s] for

³⁵ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.6 (West 2024); N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-19 (West 2024); See generally *Pazienza v. Camarata*, 381 N.J. Super. 173, 182-89 (App. Div. 2005) (the Defendant’s repeated unwanted contact with Plaintiff constituted harassment-domestic violence, and a particular message to the Plaintiff about the TV show she was watching while home alone with her daughter, showed that the Defendant’s purpose was to harass, alarm and annoy; accordingly, the Appellate Division affirmed a final restraining order against under the Defendant the PDVA).

³⁶ *M.D. v. P.D.*, 2017 WL 4558415, at *4 (App. Div. 2017) (quoting *A.M.C. v. P.B.*, 447 N.J. Super. 402, 417 (App. Div. 2016)); See generally *A.M.C. v. P.B.*, 447 N.J. Super. 402, 417 (App. Div. 2016) (“Although a defendant might not use direct physical violence when he or she engages in the predicate acts of harassment, *N.J.S.A.* 2C:33–4, or stalking, *N.J.S.A.* 2C:12–10, these acts can cause great emotional harm and psychological trauma. Thus, we must never lose sight of Justice O’Hern’s admonition that ‘there is no such thing as an act of domestic violence that is not serious.’”) (quoting *Brennan v. Orban*, 145 N.J. 282, 298 (1996)) (emphasis added).

³⁷ *H.E.S. v. J.C.S.*, 175 N.J. 309, 330-31 (2003).

³⁸ *Id.* at 330.

³⁹ *Id.* at 329.

⁴⁰ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-18 (West 2024) (“[i]t is therefore, the intent of the Legislature to assure the victims of domestic violence the maximum protection from abuse the law can provide”); N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.5(c) and (d) (West 2024) (“[d]omestic violence victims require an efficient method of terminating their lease obligations to escape abuse without that damaging their credit and rental history and, consequently, their ability to secure other safe housing; and [t]he assistance and cooperation of the entire community, including landlords, neighbors, and employers, is necessary to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in our State.”).

⁴¹ N.J. Assem. Comm. State., A.B. 2871 (Sept. 15, 2008); N.J. Sen. Comm. State., A.B. 2871 (Oct. 2, 2008).

⁴² *Id.*

tenant[s] to recover security deposit[s][.]”⁴³ Like the Senate and Assembly Committee Statements, the Governor’s message does not use the word “physical.”⁴⁴

Pending Legislation

There is one bill pending that seeks to amend N.J.S. 46:8-9.6, however it makes no substantive changes relevant to the issue discussed this report.⁴⁵ The bill is drafted to ensure that a landlord may not terminate a tenancy, fail to renew a tenancy, or refuse to enter into a rental agreement based on the tenant’s or applicant’s or a household member’s status as a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking, or based on the tenant or applicant having terminated a lease pursuant to the Safe Housing Act.⁴⁶ This bill is identical to bills that were introduced in each legislative session since 2008-2009.⁴⁷ While the current bill would bolster the protections available under the SHA, it does not recognize fear of psychological or other harm as grounds for termination of a lease. There are multiple pending bills that seek to amend the PDVA at N.J.S. 2C:25-19.⁴⁸ Only one bill specifically seeks to add psychological abuse to the list of acts that constitute domestic violence.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The proposed modifications to N.J.S. 46:8-9.6 are intended to clarify that the scope of the “threat of serious [] harm,” required for early lease termination, is not limited to “physical harm.”⁵⁰

⁴³ NJ Gov. Msg., A.B. 562 (Dec. 5, 2008).

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ The changes to N.J.S. 46:8-9.6 proposed by A.B. 3741 are limited to the removal of the word “certified” from subsections (b)(1) and (b)(2). A.B. 3741, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Feb. 22, 2024).

⁴⁶ Statement to A.B. 3741, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Feb. 22, 2024).

⁴⁷ See A.B. 2521, 2022 Leg., 220th Sess. (Feb. 14, 2022); A.B. 2514, 2020 Leg., 219th Sess. (Feb. 3, 2020); A.B. 1706, 2018 Leg., 218th Sess. (Jan. 9, 2018); A.B. 916, 2016 Leg., 217th Sess. (Jan. 27, 2016); S.B. 1610, 2017 Leg., 217th Sess. (May 25, 2017); A.B. 3655, 2014 Leg., 216th Sess. (Sept. 15, 2014); S.B. 2736, 2015 Leg., 216th Sess. (Feb. 5, 2015); A.B. 992, 2012 Leg., 215th Sess. (Jan. 10, 2012); A.B. 2891, 2010 Leg., 214th Sess. (June 14, 2010); S.B. 1932, 2011 Leg., 214th Sess. (May 12, 2011); A.B. 4366, 2009 Leg., 213th Sess. (Jan. 4, 2010).

⁴⁸ S.B. 2942, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Mar. 11, 2024) (expands the domestic violence statutes to encompass minors aged 16 and older); S.B. 2613, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Feb. 8, 2024) (clarifies that the "Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 1991" covers elder abuse in domestic settings); S.B. 2614, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Feb. 8, 2024) (clarifies the intent of the Legislature that the attempt or conspiracy to commit certain offenses may constitute acts of domestic violence); A.B. 291, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Jan. 9, 2024) (includes animal cruelty against victim's animal within definition of domestic violence and other types of abuse; establishes immunity for reporting animal cruelty; mandates reporting of animal cruelty in certain circumstances); A.B. 375, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Jan. 9, 2024) (establishes program for electronic monitoring of certain offenders; appropriates \$15 million); S.B. 879, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Jan. 9, 2024) (expands definition of victim of domestic violence); A.B. 949, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Jan. 9, 2024) (expands domestic violence protection for adoptive parents); A.B. 1516, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Jan. 9, 2024) (adds coercive control to domestic violence definition).

⁴⁹ Statement to A.B. 3236, 2024 Leg., 221st Sess. (Jan. 9, 2024) (revises the definition of domestic violence to include psychological abuse and economic abuse).

⁵⁰ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.6(a) (West 2024).

APPENDIX

The proposed modifications to N.J.S. 46:8-9.6 are shown below (with ~~strike~~through).

N.J.S. 46:8-9.6. Early termination of residential lease; conditions permitting termination

The tenant may terminate any lease of a residential property that has been leased and used by the tenant solely for the purpose of providing a dwelling place for the tenant, or for the tenant's family, prior to the expiration date thereof, if the tenant fulfills all requirements and procedures as established by P.L.2008, c. 111 (C.46:8-9.4 et al.) and provides the landlord with:

a. written notice that the tenant or a child of the tenant faces an imminent threat of serious ~~physical~~ harm from another named person if the tenant remains on the leased premises; and

b. any of the following:

(1) a certified copy of a permanent restraining order issued by a court pursuant to section 13 of “The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 1991,” P.L.1991, c. 261 (C.2C:25-29), and protecting the tenant from the person named in the written notice;

(2) a certified copy of a permanent restraining order from another jurisdiction, issued pursuant to the jurisdiction's laws concerning domestic violence, and protecting the tenant from the person named in the written notice;

(3) a law enforcement agency record documenting the domestic violence, or certifying that the tenant or a child of the tenant is a victim of domestic violence;

(4) medical documentation of the domestic violence provided by a health care provider;

(5) certification, provided by a certified Domestic Violence Specialist, or the director of a designated domestic violence agency, that the tenant or a child of the tenant is a victim of domestic violence; or

(6) other documentation or certification, provided by a licensed social worker, that the tenant or a child of the tenant is a victim of domestic violence.

COMMENT

The proposed modification to N.J.S. 46:8-9.6 of the Safe Housing Act (SHA) is the removal of the word “physical” from subsection (a) to broaden the scope of the language in recognition of the existing PDVA provisions and the case law pertaining to the threat of serious harm faced by victims of domestic violence.⁵¹ The PDVA lists

⁵¹ *Id.*

harassment, stalking, and cyber-harassment among nineteen acts that may constitute domestic violence, clarifying that the threat of serious harm from domestic violence is broader than just physical harm.⁵²

The proposed modification clarifies that physical harm is not the only serious and imminent harm faced by victims of domestic violence as established by the broad variety of acts that constitute domestic violence pursuant to N.J.S. 2C:25-19(a) of the PDVA.⁵³ The modification also aligns with legislative findings under N.J.S. 46:8-9.5 of the SHA which establish the SHA’s purpose and role in the reduction of domestic violence.⁵⁴

⁵² N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-19(a) (West 2024).

⁵³ *Id.*; *See also* N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2C:25-18 (West 2024) (legislative findings of the PDVA recognizing emotional, psychological, and financial acts of domestic violence particularly against minors, the elderly, and disabled victims).

⁵⁴ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 46:8-9.5 (West 2024) (“c. Domestic violence victims require an efficient method of terminating their lease obligations to escape abuse without that damaging their credit and rental history and, consequently, their ability to secure other safe housing....”) (emphasis added).