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Berlin property manager accused of neglect

By Tara Fischer Staff Writer

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(Sept. 24, 2026) Maryland Legal Aid has stepped to help residents of a senior housing community in Berlin who have been dealing with poor living conditions and a property management company that has not responded to their complaints so far.

The private nonprofit law firm is following up on complaints that accuse Severn Management of ignoring work orders, maintenance requests, and calls for more staff.

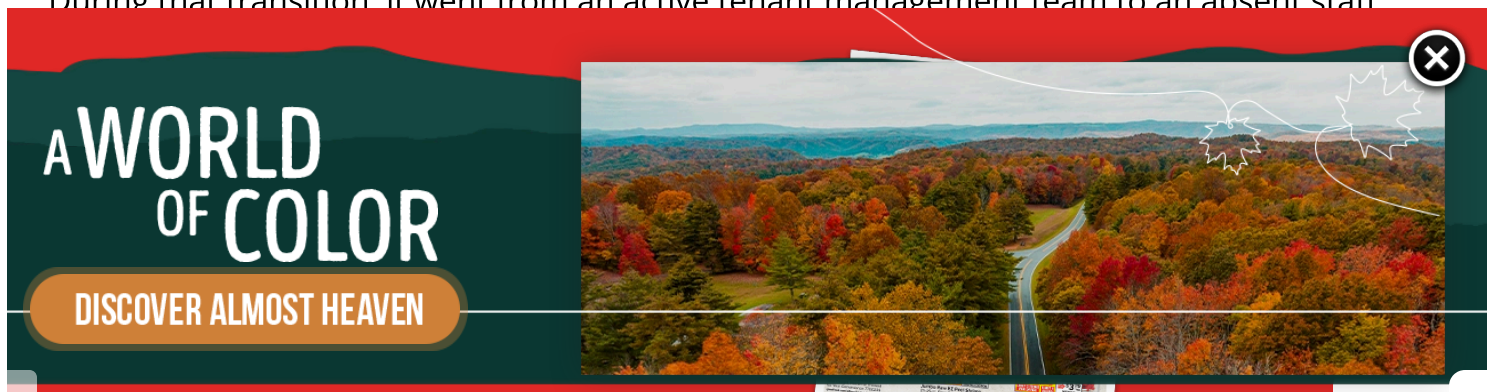
In one instance, according to residents, a tenant was without heat and air conditioning for 12 months.

Maryland Legal Aid began working with renters of Cottages at Berlin last December. Cottages is a 40-unit community offering affordable housing options to seniors aged 62 and above.

Residents sought Legal Aid's help late last year to address what they say is a lack of availability and responsiveness from Annapolis-based Severn Management, which oversees properties throughout Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia.

Law firm representative said tenants told them issues began to materialize in 2020, when oversight of the property transitioned from Schuster Management Corporation in Westminster to Severn.

"During that transition, it went from an active tenant management team to an absent staff "



A new hire came on from November 2025 to September 2026 and, during their tenure, was only at the Cottages on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Renters say Severn Management has yet to find a new property manager for the Berlin complex.

Legal Aid added that Severn's regional staff are currently supporting the site on an as-needed basis. Renters argue that this lack of engagement from Severn Management has only exacerbated concerns that upkeep requests are severely delayed.

"They don't have a full-time property manager," Legal Aid's Advocacy Director for Human Right to Housing Zafar Shah said. "That's a recipe for disaster."

Tenants say maintenance and work-order petitions are often ignored for weeks or months, sometimes longer. One resident, who wishes to remain anonymous, said that when her unit's air conditioning and heating system broke, it took Severn a year to resolve the issue.

The resident claimed she was forced to vacate her home during this winter's blizzard because the apartment's temperature dipped below freezing.

"[Residents] are entitled to cooling and heating," Shah said.

Tenants have pointed to several instances of what they describe as disrespect and disregard.

According to resident leader Fran Hubbart, one renter, who prefers not to be named, has been without air conditioning for two months.

Hubbart said the resident is handicapped after suffering a stroke and has aphasia. When he went into the former property manager's office to ask about his broken AC unit, he and the manager had trouble communicating, and the manager, claiming to feel threatened, called the police.

The authorities spoke with the resident's sister about his disability, and no report was filed.



Tenants have also recently been restricted in how often they can use property amenities.

Legal Aid representatives said that when they met with residents at the start of their partnership, the two groups gathered at the Cottages' community center.

After that meeting, tenants were barred from using the space, even for recreational events. The reason given for the change in operating hours was a water leak.

Hubbart said the community center used to be open all the time. Residents hosted potlucks, bingo, exercise classes, or used the space to read. After weeks of zero access, renters received a memo that the center would be available only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when the former property manager was on-site.

When asked why the new rule was implemented, Severn said it was a liability concern.

"The community center is one of the amenities of our lease," Hubbart said. "Just like a washer, dryer, a stove, or a microwave."

Legal Aid's role with the Cottages residents has been to inform them of their tenant rights and help them advocate, Shivers said. As part of these efforts, the agency sent a letter to Severn Management outlining changes the Cottages community would like to see.

The letter addressed the community center situation: "Residents request that Severn Management make the Community Room available for resident council activities as required by Maryland Code, Real Property."

The correspondence adds that the former property manager notified residents they would need permission to invite Legal Aid to future meetings. The letter asks that this requirement be waived and adds "these actions demonstrate a disregard for protected tenant association activities."

Additionally, residents asked through Legal Aid's letter that Severn Management assign at least two property management staff to be on duty Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. They also requested that the company hire at least one maintenance employee to work 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The letter was sent to Severn on June 8, and Legal Aid says it has yet to receive a reply.

Legal Aid also reached out to the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development for documentation on Severn Management's regulatory compliance.



According to Shah, the department quoted them a \$1,200 fee for access to the information, a cost he said is unexpectedly steep.

However, in an email Tuesday, DHCD said that the request would cost \$1,200 because Legal Aid's request was "estimated to require more than two hours of staff time to process" and that MLA "received a letter proving the estimated cost of fulfilling the request, consistent with the Maryland Public Information Act."

According to forms provided by DHCD, Legal Aid's request included financing applications and approvals, tenant service plans, annual compliance certifications, on-site inspection reports from Jan. 1, 2012, through Aug. 3, 2026, and notices of noncompliance.

DHCD's response to Legal Aid said the request exceeded staff time beyond the first two free hours; at \$56.44 an hour plus a \$60 archives retrieval fee, the estimated total was \$1,188.80.

The DHCD's statement added that "[The Department] is not the regulatory agency responsible for enforcing local property maintenance codes; those enforcement responsibilities generally rest with the applicable county or municipal government."

Residents say that they are simply asking for respect from their management company.

"We just want to be comfortable," said Jo McQuown, a tenant leader. "We shouldn't have to wonder if our maintenance issues are ever going to be dealt with or not."

Hubbart added that upkeep like regular lawn mowing and beautification projects are put off or never done, appliances aren't repaired until way past their useful life, and there is no consistent work order process.

"How are they getting away with all these Band-Aid fixes?" she said. "Everybody is turning a blind eye...You've got individuals who have nowhere to go if they were evicted. And they are elderly, or they have some sort of disability, and they're afraid to say anything."



Severn Management did not respond to a request for comment.