WEST VIRGINIA CODE CHAPTER 55 ARTICLE 3C

WV Legislature

§55-3C-1. Short title; findings.

(a) This article shall be known and may be cited as the “Stop Squatters Act”.

(b). The Legislature finds that the right to exclude others from entering and the right to direct others to immediately vacate a person’s residential or commercial property are fundamental property rights.

WV Legislature

§55-3C-2. Squatters defined: squatters not tenants; squatting constitutes criminal trespass; petition and eviction not appropriate remedies for squatters; remedy is arrest for trespass.

(a) "Squatter" means a person unlawfully occupying a dwelling unit or other structure who is not entitled under a rental or lease agreement or who is not authorized by the tenant or owner to occupy that dwelling unit or structure. "Squatter" does not include a tenant who holds over in a periodic tenancy as described in §37-6-5 of this code, or an owner.

(b) "Squatting" means the act of being a squatter. Squatting is synonymous with trespass, and is a criminal act under §61-3B-2 or §61-3B-3 of this Code.

(c) Squatters are not considered tenants for purposes of this code and are not entitled to eviction proceedings afforded to lawful tenants. A Court of this state shall not require the use of eviction, or a similar procedure such as those found under §55-3A-1, *et seq*. or §55-3B-1, *et seq*. of this Code, by an owner in any instance involving the removal of a squatter from possession of a property.

WV Legislature

§55-3C-3. Limited Alternative Remedy to Remove Squatter from Residential and Commercial Real Properties.

(a) A property owner or their authorized agent may request, from any law-enforcement officer having authority to act in the jurisdiction where the subject property is located, the immediate removal of any person squatting in a residential dwelling or commercial building if the following conditions are met:

(1) The requesting person is the property owner or authorized agent;

(2) The real property includes a residential dwelling or commercial building;

(3) An unauthorized person or persons are unlawfully occupying the property;

(4) The property was not open to the public at the time of entry;

(5) The property owner or their authorized agent has directed the unauthorized person(s) to leave;

(6) The unauthorized person is not current or former owners or current or former lawful tenants;

(7) The unauthorized person is not immediate family members of the property owner or tenants; and

(8) No pending litigation related to the subject property exists between the property owner and the unauthorized person(s).

(b) To request the immediate removal pursuant to this section, the property owner or authorized agent shall submit a completed and verified complaint to remove persons unlawfully occupying real property ("complaint") to a law-enforcement officer having authority to act in the jurisdiction of the subject property.

(c) Upon receipt of the complaint, the law-enforcement agency to which the complaint was submitted shall conduct preliminary fact-finding, which may include reviewing any alleged lease agreement, interviewing relevant individuals, and other relevant inquiries to ascertain the validity of the complaint. If the preliminary fact-finding indicates probable cause that the conditions outlined in subsection (a) of this section are met, then the law-enforcement agency shall serve a notice to immediately vacate upon the unlawful occupants and put the owner in possession of the real property.

(d) The law-enforcement agency is entitled to a fee for service of a notice pursuant to subsection (c) of this section. Upon serving the notice, the property owner or their authorized agent may request the law-enforcement agency to remove the unauthorized person if they do not vacate the property when ordered to do so or request that they remain at the property to ensure the safety of all parties during the removal of the person property

WV Legislature

of the unlawful occupants.

(e) This section does not limit any other property owner rights or the authority of law-enforcement.

WV Legislature

§55-3C-4. Criminal mischief; penalties.

(a) A person who unlawfully occupies a residential dwelling or commercial building consistent with this article and as a result of the unlawful occupation causes damage to the real property, its fixtures, or personal property of the owner in an amount less than $1,000 is guilty of a misdemeanor, and, upon conviction thereof, shall be confined in jail for a term not to exceed one year or fined not to exceed $2,500, or both fined and confined.

(b) A person who unlawfully occupies a residential dwelling or commercial building consistent with this article and as a result of the unlawful occupation causes damage to the real property, its fixtures, or personal property of the owner in an amount more than $1,000 in damages commits a felony, and, upon conviction thereof, shall be imprisoned in the penitentiary not less than one nor more than 10 years, or in the discretion of the court be confined in jail not more than one year and fined not more than $2,500.

WV Legislature

§55-3C-5. Making false statement to detain real property; false complaint; civil causes of action; immunity.

(a) A property owner or their authorized agent who knowingly submits a complaint pursuant to this article in bad faith is subject to criminal prosecution for false swearing, and shall indemnify the law-enforcement agency and its agents for all costs and damages which may arise from a law-enforcement officer's good faith actions pursuant to this article.

(b) A civil cause of action for wrongful removal may be brought by a person who has been removed from a property pursuant to this article, with remedies including restoration of possession, actual costs, damages, and attorney fees.

(c) In a civil action against a law-enforcement officer or law-enforcement agency based on action taken pursuant to this article, any immunity authorized by this code or other applicable authority may be asserted.

WV Legislature

§55-3C-6. Fraudulent sale or lease of residential real property.

Any person who knowingly lists or advertises residential real property or a commercial building for sale or renting without legal title or authority is guilty of a felony and, upon conviction thereof, shall be imprisoned in the penitentiary not less than one nor more than 10 years, or, in the discretion of the court, be confined in jail not more than one year and shall be fined not more than $2,500.

WV Legislature