



**STATEWIDE  
ADVOCACY SUPPORT UNIT**

**Cornelia Bright Gordon, Esq.**  
Director of Advocacy  
for Administrative Law  
(410) 951-7728  
cbgordon@mdlab.org

**Gregory Countess, Esq.**  
Director of Advocacy  
for Housing & Community  
Economic Development  
(410) 951-7687  
gcountess@mdlab.org

**Anthony H. Davis, II, Esq.**  
Director of Advocacy  
for Consumer Law  
(410) 951-7703  
adavis@mdlab.org

**Erica I. LeMon, Esq.**  
Director of Advocacy  
for Children's Rights  
(410) 951-7648  
elemon@mdlab.org

**Bobbie Steyer, Esq.**  
Director of Advocacy  
for Family Law  
(410) 951-7737  
bsteyer@mdlab.org

**Julianne Kelly Tarver, Esq.**  
Director  
Pro Bono Program  
(410) 951-7642  
jkelly@mdlab.org

**Meaghan McDermott, Esq.**  
Director  
Community Lawyering Initiative  
(410) 951-7635  
mmcdermott@mdlab.org

**EXECUTIVE STAFF**

**Wilhelm H. Joseph, Jr., Esq.**  
Executive Director

**Stuart O. Simms, Esq.**  
Chief Counsel

**Gustava E. Taler, Esq.**  
Chief Operating Officer

**Administrative Offices**  
500 East Lexington Street  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
(410) 951-7777  
(800) 999-8904  
(410) 951-7778 (Fax)

www.mdlab.org  
01.2021



February 17, 2021

The Honorable Luke Clippinger  
Chairman of the Judiciary Committee  
House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**RE: Maryland Legal Aid Written Testimony in Support of HB 523 – Baltimore City – Repossession for Failure to Pay Rent – Registration and License Information**

Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this critical bill. Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) is a non-profit law firm that provides free legal services to the State's low-income and vulnerable residents. MLA handles civil legal cases involving a wide range of issues, including family law, housing, public benefits, consumer law (e.g., bankruptcy and debt collection), and criminal record expungements to remove child custody barriers, a driver's license, and employment. Maryland Legal Aid supports HB 523 and asks that this committee give it a favorable report.

This letter serves as notice that Harrison Mont, Esq. will testify in support of HB 523 on behalf of Maryland Legal Aid at Delegate Wanika B. Fisher's request. This bill ensures that landlords filing for evictions for failure to pay rent have the required licenses. Before filing an eviction action, landlords must have their license, and in Court must prove licensure by a preponderance of the evidence standard. As a license is already required for a landlord to collect rent in Baltimore City, HB 523 only prevents unjust failure to pay rent evictions.

When representing tenants in Baltimore City, MLA advocates often discover unlicensed landlords filing actions against tenants. Unfortunately, most tenants cannot find representation and are therefore uninformed that landlords require a license. This problem is illustrated in Stout Risius Ross's recent report, which found that only 1% of tenants were represented in Baltimore City's eviction court, while 96% of landlords have legal representation. Also, the Court operates under the assumption that landlords have complied with the licensure law. A rent court study conducted by MLA and The Public Justice Center estimated that in Maryland, there were over 21,000 default judgments against the tenant where a license was required, but not provided, in 2012 alone—leading to erroneous judgments in favor of the landlord and often illegal eviction of families.

The purpose of the license requirement is to assure that tenants are living in safe and habitable properties. A property must be inspected before a license is issued. The inspection ensures compliance with lead paint regulations and the Baltimore City building code. In many cases where a landlord is renting to tenants without a license,

the property is entirely unsafe for human habitation. MLA advocates often represent tenants living in unlicensed properties covered in mold, have unstable stairways, areas at risk of collapse, no fire escape, and other life-threatening dangers.

Maryland Legal Aid's mission is the advancement of Human Rights and Justice for All. This mission encompasses the right to safe and habitable housing and the equal protection of the law as enshrined in Articles 14 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Baltimore City's license requirements are an essential part of ensuring Baltimore complies with the human right to safe and habitable housing. HB 523 would strengthen license requirements and provide additional assurances that courts are aware of landlords' licensure status before granting a failure to pay rent judgment.

Thank you for your consideration of this written testimony. For the reasons stated above, MLA urges a favorable report on HB523.

/S/ Harrison Mont  
Harrison Mont, Esq.  
Staff Attorney  
Maryland Legal Aid  
hmont@mdlalab.org  
Tel: 410-951-7748