

Provide a Right to Counsel in Eviction Hearings

Bill number: HB0018

Position: SUPPORT

Dear Judiciary Committee,

I am a resident of **District 30A** and a member of Showing Up for Racial Justice - Annapolis and Anne Arundel County. I am testifying in **support** of bill HB0018 (and SB0154). This bill establishes a right for renters facing eviction to have legal counsel in court hearings.

Currently, most landlords have legal representation for eviction hearings, while most renters do not. With renters fending for themselves, it is no surprise that these hearings nearly always result in eviction. Evictions are detrimental to families and the communities they occur in. Additionally, during the pandemic, being forced out of your home can result in a higher risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19. Baltimore passed legislation this year to guarantee right to counsel for renters facing eviction, and I ask you to support HB0018 to guarantee legal counsel to renters in eviction court throughout the state of Maryland.

According to an article in DCist on January 29, 2021, 99% of renters in eviction court in Baltimore City are unrepresented, compared to only 4% of landlords. This incredible discrepancy results in an unlevel playing field for renters. Many renters have legitimate defenses regarding the compliant causing eviction, but may not be able to effectively navigate the legal system to have their voice heard. This bill would ensure that renters across Maryland have a fair shot at remaining in their home. Further, if landlords know that renters will have access to legal representation, they may file fewer eviction cases, which would reduce the costs of processing eviction cases and providing renters legal representation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has become much more dire. A Washington Post opinion piece by the Editorial Board on January 31, 2021 demonstrated that despite the existing moratoriums on evictions during the pandemic, people in Maryland continue to be evicted, especially in cases where tenants lack legal representation. From August – November 2020, approximately 2,500 evictions took place in Maryland. The Washington Post piece states that more than 1 out of 7 renter households in Maryland are at risk of eviction as of November 2020. The scale of the eviction crisis is about to exponentially increase. Now is the time to pass the Right to Counsel bill to give our neighbors the support they need to remain in their homes.

To conclude, I strongly encourage you to vote in SUPPORT of HB0018.

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,

Megan Randby

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Showing Up for Racial Justice – Annapolis and Anne Arundel County