



Voices Maryland

Committee: Judiciary

Testimony on: HB0018-- Landlord and Tenant – Eviction Action – Right to Counsel

Sponsor: Delegate Wanika Fisher

Organization: Voices Maryland

Person Submitting: Sarahia Benn, Legislative Executive

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: February 17, 2021

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing testimony today in support of HB0018. Voices Maryland is a grassroots organization focused on State and County level legislation and policies that impacts marginalized communities and veterans affairs. Housing legislation is of massive importance to these communities particularly due to how impacted these communities have been historically and currently.

Representation is important: In Maryland Housing policy has leaned heavily on the side of the Landlord. The right to Counsel law would make it more playing field equitable for the tenant and possibly prevent negative outcomes.

“When people show up to court with representation, they achieve outcomes that are more fair and equitable,” Mayor Brandon M. Scott said in December 2020 upon Baltimore city being the seventh jurisdiction to guarantee renters the right to counsel. Now it’s time that Maryland makes this a State law.

Why A Right to Counsel:

- The cost of right to counsel in eviction cases is less than the cost of upsetting the housing market in Maryland. Example in Baltimore the cost for right to counsel is approx \$6.8 million and evictions \$35.6 million
- Marginalized and Low-income tenants are disproportionately people of color, women, and single-parent families, nearly always lack legal representation.
- The Evictions process is complex and the landlord on average has legal representation 90% of the time while the tenants have representation 10% of the time. “Systemic process discrimination” is what I would call it.
- Black, Brown, Marginalized, and Veteran populations who end up with the least assistance in the legal process and settlement discussion are denied any chance of justice due to an imbalance of power. The impacts are life changing traumas and disruptions for those who are the most vulnerable.
- Preventing evictions and helping residents avoid homelessness is a Humanitarian thing to do in a pandemic.
- Preventing evictions and helping residents avoid homelessness would be a health crisis in normal conditions, let alone a pandemic.
- Forced moveouts, landlord abuse, discrimination, intimidation, and other circumstances that result in displacement without the formality of an eviction filing.
- The potential negative effects on evicted tenants are consistent, such as, unemployment, loss of child custody, quality of life instability, and disruption to child education.
- Increase shelter costs.
- For Black, Marginalized, and Veteran communities that are struggling increased policing, incarceration, and prosecution possibilities due to housing instability.
- Community instability
- Loss of personal assets
- Impacts the Housing Market overall in a negative manner.

Summary: By establishing a right to counsel law and a complete process for it Maryland will be protecting Marylanders that are most vulnerable and ensuring fairness in representation.

For these reasons we urge you to vote favorably for HB0018.

(Dedicated to Black History month)

"The largest challenge that we face, from my perspective, is the ability to continue moving forward so the agency will have a single mission: that is, to provide decent, safe, and affordable housing." Alphonso Jackson