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TESTIMONY ON HB 724- FAVORABLE
Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund

TO: Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon, and member of the Judiciary Committee

FROM: Carol Stern

My name is Carol Stern. I live in Chevy Chase, in state district 16 and I am a member of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation. I am providing testimony in favor of HB724, Access to Counsel for Renters.

The human need for housing has been central to Jewish thought forever. Our sacred texts recognize that having safe, stable housing is key to a healthy society, and we know that it is key to reducing racial inequities. Our Jewish texts are full of conversation, laws, and traditions about the obligations of landlords and tenants, about how homes should be built safely, and about making sure that people can remain in their homes. These obligations have taken on even more urgency in the past two years: all people should be able to stay in their homes, especially during a pandemic.

Housing is a human right and it should not be predicated on how much money a person has to hire counsel in a rent court proceeding. In 1948, the United States signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), recognizing adequate housing as a component of the human right to an adequate standard of living. The renters most affected by the lack of counsel are those living at or below the poverty line and/or who have experienced pandemic-related loss of income. People who face eviction in Rent Court are overwhelmingly Black women, households with minor children, and people who do not receive a housing subsidy.

Currently, only 1% of tenants, who find themselves in Rent Court, are represented by a lawyer, while 96% of landlords have representation. Last session, you established a program to help renters gain access to legal counsel, which would reduce evictions, and would also save the state tens of millions of dollars in reduced Medicaid and foster care costs related to homelessness, with similar savings in local jurisdictions. It is now up to you this session to adequately fund and implement this program.

For all these reasons, I ask the Committee for a favorable report on HB724.