

Dear Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with CASA de Maryland and Renters United. I am a resident of MD District 41. I live in the Roland Park neighborhood of Baltimore City. **I am testifying in support of House Bill 724.**



House Bill 724 would transfer \$11,800,000 from the Abandoned Property Fund to the Access to Counsel in Evictions Fund for FY2023.

In 2020, because of the devastating economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Maryland Office of the Attorney General (OAG) partnered with the Maryland Access to Justice Commission to establish the COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force. One of the task force's urgent recommendations was to take action to reduce the number of pandemic-related evictions in Maryland. In response to this recommendation, the Maryland General Assembly passed HB 18 during its 2021 session. This bill, in part, created a right to counsel program that provides low-income tenants across the state with access to legal representation in eviction proceedings. The law went into effect October 1, 2021, creating the Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force. This Task Force urgently needs the funding allocation HB partially provides for.

Relying on court data and analysis from Stout Risius Ross, the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) estimates that there are 29,683 limited-income residents who have an unmet need for legal representation in eviction cases. MLSC estimates that with an additional allocation of \$11.8 million for Fiscal Year 2023, the State can meet approximately 1/3 of that need. This funding is only part of the puzzle, but it is an *essential* part of ensuring low-income renters aren't displaced and forced into a state of homelessness because of pandemic-related circumstances. Without any actual funding allocation, last year's HB 18 that the Maryland General Assembly *already passed* won't have the teeth to actually prevent the evictions that cause disruptive displacement of families and the resulting social, economic, and public health costs of displacement.

It is critical that State money be allocated so that renters have access to counsel, since, according to the COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force, "*over 90% of housing providers are represented and over 90% of tenants are not.*" This imbalance turns rent court into a rubber stamp for landlords wishing to penalize and potentially evict renters for any reason, no matter how capricious and unfair. This is especially difficult for female-headed households and black households, who were evicted **46%** and **195%** more frequently than their male and white households, respectively, in Baltimore City between January 2018 and June 2019. The legislature already affirmed the belief that this is not a just state of things, so it's time to put our money where our mouths are.

We must remedy this issue in order to give the vast majority of renters a fair chance to challenge pandemic-related eviction proceedings, *as is already dictated by State law.*

It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to **vote in support of House Bill 724.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Johnson
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Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore