



**MARYLAND
LEGAL AID**

Advancing
**Human Rights and
Justice for All**

**STATEWIDE
ADVOCACY SUPPORT UNIT**

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

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

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

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

February 4, 2022

The Honorable Kumar P. Barve
Chairman, Environment and Transportation Committee
House Office Building,
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Testimony in support of House Bill 449 – Maryland Renters Tax Credit Program

Dear Chairperson Barve and members of the committee

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 449. This significant legislation would increase the ability of renters to afford the cost of housing by extending the time for a renter to apply for tax relief.

Maryland Legal Aid is a private, non-profit law firm dedicated to providing high-quality legal advocacy to protect and advance human rights for individuals, families, and communities. With 12 offices around the state, MLA assists individuals and families with various civil legal issues, including consumer, housing, public benefits, and family law matters. MLA also represents abused and neglected children and provides legal assistance to older adults and nursing home residents. This letter serves as notice that Gregory Countess, Esq. will testify on behalf of Maryland Legal Aid at the request of Delegate Stephanie Smith.

HB 449 would increase the ability of MLA's client base to afford rent payments. In 2021 269,639 families in Maryland were defined as "extremely low income," and more than 120,000 renters spent over 50% of their income on rent.¹

This proposed expansion of the Maryland Renters Tax Credit program is timely. Low-income Marylanders continue to face challenges securing and maintaining stable housing. Moreover, MLA's older adult clients and clients with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the continued negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Elise Gould and David Cooper in a paper presented by the Economic Policy Institute, 48% of older adults in Maryland are "economically vulnerable" and are at best one economic shock away from being unable to cover their necessities and support a simple yet dignified quality of life.

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.mdlaborg
04.2021



¹ <https://dhcd.maryland.gov/Documents/Other%20Publications/Report.pdf>

Maryland's rate of economically vulnerable elderly surpasses every state that borders it, including West Virginia. MLA's clients living with disabilities are also in a position to benefit from this amended tax credit, as individuals with disabilities are twice as likely to be living in poverty as those who are not disabled.²

HB 449 will extend the time for renters to apply and receive the Maryland Renters Tax Credit, by modestly increasing state expenditures, in an effective effort to decrease homelessness. A recent study found that stable housing, among other factors, would save \$10,300.00 per homeless individual.³ In 2014, the General Assembly amended this tax credit, directing the state of Maryland to promote the renters tax relief program and concentrate these promotional efforts on high poverty tracts. Thus, in 2014, the General Assembly acknowledged a vital issue with the tax credit- that those individuals eligible for its benefit were unaware or unable to access its promised relief. Extending the time for low-income Marylanders to apply, including older adults and individuals living with disabilities, is the next logical step in ensuring that the modest boost in income made available under the tax credit is available to as many eligible individuals as possible.

MLA has adopted a Human Rights framework, and Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares the following: *Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.* Further amending the Maryland Renters Tax Credit program by passing HB 449 will allow MLA's clients to access this right to housing tangibly and effectively. MLA asks that this Committee issue a favorable report on HB 449.

Sincerely,

/s/ Gregory Countess

Gregory Countess, Esq.

Director of Advocacy for Housing and Community Development

² http://www.mdod.maryland.gov/uploadedfiles/mdod/resources/employment/jfi%20dod%20employment%20report%202008-2011_final_20140115.pdf

³ <https://nlihc.org/resource/homelessness-prevention-programs-improve-outcomes-and-save-money>