



**MARYLAND
LEGAL AID**

Advancing
**Human Rights and
Justice for All**

Senate Bill 308

Housing and Community Development – Just Community Designation

In the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Hearing on February 1, 2024

Position: FAVORABLE

Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) submits its written and oral testimony on SB 308 in response to a request from the Department of Housing and Community Development

MLA, the state’s largest provider of free civil legal services, is proud to testify in favor of SB 308, because our clients come from precisely the communities the bill describes. Our clients *are* those communities. However, as the text recognizes, those communities have been anything but just.

Our clients suffer from virtually all the issues identified in the proposed selection criteria. Ours are the families who cannot afford a home, and therefore cannot build intergenerational wealth, because of “past and current trends in homeownership”—namely, home prices that have skyrocketed due to underproduction. They are the Black and Brown people who have been summarily excluded from the best and safest neighborhoods and schools because of “redlining, exclusionary zoning, or racially restrictive covenants.” They are the elderly and disabled Marylanders in nursing homes and assisted living, struggling from “unequal exposure to environmental and health hazards,” fighting for the care and benefits they deserve. They are the victims of our failed, racist experiment in mass incarceration, living in areas with high “imprisonment rate[s],” seeking criminal record expungements so they can work and contribute.

These are neighborhoods like Cherry Hill, Curtis Bay, and Historic Sharp Leadenhall in Baltimore, which were redlined to the hilt and bear the brunt of environmental injustice near the water. Like Cottage City and Seat Pleasant in Prince George’s, where District-adjacent housing prices are ever increasing, yet the poverty rate in those areas far outstrips the rest of the county. Like South Cumberland in Allegany County, where racial segregation in housing opportunity doubled from 2010 to 2017. Like Aberdeen and Edgewood in Harford County, where rental properties are poisoned by lead paint and mold, leading to persistent health complications, particularly in our elders living with disabilities.

We commend the Administration and the General Assembly for identifying these factors as the sources of income inequality and underinvestment in our state. The bill sends a powerful message about our values. They are MLA’s values as well. Moreover, the bill is a substantive first step to ensure that fiscal investment is directed to the neediest communities—those who have been ignored for too long. Of course, it is only a first step. MLA looks forward to working with public and private actors alike to take the concrete follow-on measures of securing sufficient funding, identifying the most meaningful projects, and ensuring the returns of those projects go to the people who deserve it most.

Because SB 308 makes an important first stride toward remedying past and present discrimination and underinvestment, MLA urges its passage and looks forward to next steps. If you would like additional information on this bill or the underlying issues it addresses, please contact Somil Trivedi, MLA's Chief Legal & Advocacy Director, at strivedi@mdlaboratory.org.