



MARYLAND
LEGAL AID

Advancing
Human Rights and
Justice for All

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February 19, 2020

The Honorable Luke Clippinger, Chair
House Judicial Proceedings Committee
Room 101, House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

**Re: Testimony in support of House Bill 797 State Court Administrator -
Warrants of Restitution and Writs of Possession - Data Collection and
Reporting**

Dear Chairperson Clippinger and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 797. HB 797 would require the State Court Administrator to record statewide eviction information in a database available to the public. Delegate Regina T. Boyce requested that Maryland Legal Aid provide testimony to the Committee on this legislation. Maryland Legal Aid (“Legal Aid”) is a private, non-profit organization that provides free legal services to indigent Maryland residents. In our 13 offices around the state, we help individuals and families with a wide array of civil legal issues including consumer, housing, public benefits, and family law matters. We also represent abused and neglected children and provide legal assistance to senior citizens and nursing home residents, as well as working with the private bar to help thousands of Marylanders expunge their records. This letter serves as notice that Harrison Mont will be testifying on behalf of Legal Aid at the request of Delegate Regina T. Boyce.

While evictions are happening throughout the country, Maryland’s data regarding eviction is particularly lacking. Princeton’s Eviction Lab, in tracking evictions nationwide, only found complete data for Garrett, Caroline, and Prince George’s counties.¹ This is in stark comparison to the multitude of states where the Eviction Lab found accurate and complete eviction data. While we may not have the numbers, we know that eviction is an epidemic plaguing Maryland. For instance, studies carried out by the Public Justice Center concluded that, in Baltimore city alone, over 6,000 evictions occur every year. We need to create solutions to Maryland’s eviction problems, and we cannot do that without a centralized, “one-stop” source of eviction data.

¹ Eviction Lab, Eviction Map, <https://evictionlab.org/>



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As an attorney at Maryland Legal Aid, I have seen firsthand the widespread eviction epidemic. While Legal Aid represents impoverished people throughout the state in a host of different matters, eviction prevention may be the most frequently occurring and important issue for our clients. In 2019 alone, Legal Aid has represented clients in over 4,000 housing cases state-wide, many of which had eviction prevention as the primary issue. If you came to visit a Legal Aid office during walk-in hours, you would find our doors filled with people desperately trying to remain in their homes.

While Legal Aid sees a large number of clients, those numbers pale in comparison to the total number of people who face housing instability throughout the state. There are far too many people in Maryland who have experienced the trauma that comes with losing their home. This problem is particularly pervasive in Baltimore, which a 2013 American Housing Survey ranked as having the second highest rate of households threatened with eviction in the United States.² Outside of the city, high rates of evictions are also occurring, but these numbers are virtually invisible without the data to track them. This means a large portion of Maryland's population lives in a state of constant fear. Always concerned that the next knock at the door will be the sheriff's.

The price of eviction is high on the individual and on society as a whole. Without a home it is hard for an individual to stay employed, it is hard for a student to succeed in school, and it may be impossible for a family to find a safe and warm place to live. Eviction is an event which is more than an inconvenience, it is devastating and a threat to a person's human right. Housing instability also destroys communities, removing long-standing neighbors and friends and changing the culture of an area. Ultimately, the cost of this devastation is borne by the state, which must provide shelter and aid to the now homeless families. With the burdensome cost of eviction falling on individuals, communities, and the state, it is not only a moral obligation for Maryland to track eviction, but also a fiscal imperative.

Currently there is no "one-stop" source for eviction data. While the Maryland Judiciary has information on eviction filings, this tells us nothing about actual evictions. Some Maryland sheriffs track evictions, but this is not universal and each sheriffs' office uses a different format. Such incomplete and disparate data obscures the reality of eviction in Maryland. Without accurate information the impact eviction has and the needs it creates in the communities cannot be understood, measured or addressed.

² Public Justice Center, How Renters Are Processed in the Baltimore City Rent Court, December 2015, <https://abell.org/sites/default/files/files/cd-justicediverted216.pdf>



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By providing a one-stop, publicly available source for eviction data, HB 797 would give stakeholders the information desperately needed to address housing instability in Maryland. For the first time, we would understand exactly where and how many evictions are occurring, leading to state-wide solutions. HB 797 gives us all this information while protecting the privacy of those we seek to assist. Housing instability has plagued this state for too long, and passing this bill is the necessary first step to addressing the problem.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that you give a favorable report to HB 797.

Sincerely,

Harrison Mont
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