



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
McCourt School of Public Policy

Philip Garboden, PhD, MSE, MPP
HCRC Professor of Affordable Housing
University of Hawaii
pgarbod@hawaii.edu

Eva Rosen, PhD
Assistant Professor
Georgetown University
eva.rosen@georgetown.edu

Testimony on SB 544/HB 797

We are writing to express our support for SB 544 and HB 797, bills that would require streamlined and reliable data reporting on evictions in Maryland.

We come to this testimony as individuals with over a decade of experience conducting policy relevant academic research on housing both in Maryland and nationally. Our work, broadly summarized, focuses on how supply side actors (namely landlords and developers) respond to state Federal, state, and local housing policies with important consequences for poor and low-income families.

We have conducted extensive research for the *Department of Housing and Urban Development*, including a 2018 report on urban landlordism in which Baltimore was presented as a core case. Dr. Rosen has a forthcoming book from Princeton University Press looking at the Housing Choice Voucher Program in Baltimore's Park Heights. And, most recently, we have written on the causes and consequences of eviction in Baltimore, in an article published in *City and Community* that received national attention in media outlets such as *CityLab*.

In all of this work, the lack of data transparency around evictions in Maryland has been a fundamental impediment. Without good data there cannot be good analysis. And without good analysis, we believe there can neither accountability nor reform. As the data inventory currently exists in the state, it is extremely time consuming to collect and analyze reasonably representative data on evictions in a particular county, let alone compare trends across counties or track changes over time.

We recognize that there are important concerns about privacy. We share these concerns. Eviction is a stigmatizing event, and we would never support a bill that would put families at risk. **However, after careful discussion, we do not believe these bills, as written, will harm poor families.** The primary reason for this assessment is that the information in the proposed reports is already publicly available, albeit in highly inconvenient ways. While such a lack of accessibility certainly deters academic and advocacy research (including citizen scientists), it has never deterred tenant screening companies who have the resources to collect and clean the information. Meanwhile, allowing researchers and advocates access to better data would allow for more thorough assessment of the scope and nature of the eviction problem for families who face housing insecurity.

Eviction data, if available at all, is provided to individual researchers or organizations in a piecemeal, inconsistent, and inefficient fashion. This has resulted in some good work on eviction in Maryland, but the analysis has been extremely resource-intensive. Currently the data infrastructure does not align with the level of data democratization we believe the state is capable of.

Moreover, the data that is provided – often just eviction filings - is not sufficiently detailed to increase our understanding of how (and how many) families move through the many stages of the eviction process – a critical piece of information for reform.

Eviction is a complex process and requires rigorous data to understand completely. Beginning when a poor family falls behind on their rent, the process of moving through the court system to the point of being bodily removed from the home proceeds as a series of legal stages, each providing opportunities for some families to avoid eviction, while increasing the housing insecurity of others.

To understand how to make this process as just and humane as possible, it is critical for researchers like us, as well as the public in general, to have access to reliable information comparable across time and space.

For example, only by comparing evictions fee structure across counties, would it be possible to assess how different procedures impact outcomes for families. The cost of filing for an eviction is slightly higher in Baltimore City than it is elsewhere in the state. Researchers might then examine the impact of this difference. What if fees were raised? What if they were lowered? How would landlords and tenants respond? Right now, we do not know. And we cannot begin to address these questions rigorously due to the lack of data infrastructure.

Frankly it is shocking to us that Maryland lags behind other states in this regard.

The state contains one of the highest skilled workforces in the nation. It should be a leader in data-driven governance. Housing affordability and eviction are issues of enormous importance in all of Maryland's counties, rising to crisis levels in many areas. To address them will require efforts at many levels, but we fundamentally believe that this all starts with transparent data.

We urge you to support these bills – no problem is ever solved by obscurity.