



**Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 154 (Senator Hettleman)  
Landlord and Tenant - Eviction Action - Right to Counsel**

January 28, 2021

Dear Chairman Smith and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

On behalf of Strong Future Maryland, we write in strong support of Senate Bill 154. Strong Future Maryland works to advance bold, progressive policy changes to address systemic inequality and promote a sustainable, just and prosperous economic future for all Marylanders. We urge you to support this legislation as part of our efforts to address discriminatory housing practices in the state of Maryland and to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and equitably, regardless of background or income level.

Although the Constitution guarantees the right of criminal defendants to legal representation, it does not guarantee that right to those who have been charged in civil cases. SB 154 aims to address this issue by providing free legal representation and assistance to low income households and helping to create a level playing field in which landlords do not have an unfair advantage over tenants. Numerous [studies](#) have shown that the legislation currently in place has had a disproportionately negative impact on people of color and marginalized groups and that tenants from disadvantaged backgrounds experienced significantly higher rates of eviction than the general population. The current status quo is not only the primary reason why many families who have been evicted have had to move to unsafe neighborhoods, but it has also had an enormous negative impact on the health outcomes of those affected by these policies. This not only affects adults and parents who often report significantly higher rates of depression and stress following an eviction but is also a particularly traumatic experience for children as well. The impact that such an experience can have on children cannot be emphasized enough, with many of those who have been affected by these policies developing conditions that can often be lifelong, preventing them from achieving their full potential and living a happy and fulfilling life that most people take for granted.

A number of studies also found that nationally only ten percent of tenants involved in eviction proceedings had legal representation. **This figure is even lower in Maryland which according to a [study](#) conducted by the Justice in Government Project, found that 99 percent of the tenants who had to take part in legal proceedings relating to evictions in the state were unable to obtain professional representation and were forced to represent themselves during those hearings.** This is concerning because without the representation and assistance of experienced professionals, the vast majority of tenants often end up losing their cases and are evicted from their homes.

If SB154 were signed into law, it is expected that the incidence of evictions will drop dramatically and that low income households will finally be able to receive the assistance they need from qualified professionals who will be able to help tenants find safe and conveniently located housing at a rent they can afford and to negotiate a reasonable time for them to move out. Maryland needs to do more to assist tenants in their dealings with landlords which is why the adoption of this legislation is so important and why action needs to be taken to address this issue.

Strong Future Maryland urges the committee to vote favorably on SB154.