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Jeffrey Rubin
Potomac, MD 20854



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SBI54/HB18
Landlord and Tenant – Eviction Action – Right to Counsel

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Jeffrey Rubin (on behalf of JUFJ)

My name is Jeff Rubin and I am a resident of Potomac, in District 15. I am the co-chair of the Labor and Housing Justice team of Jews United for Justice, which organizes more than 5,500 people around the state in support of local social, racial, and economic justice campaigns. I provide this testimony on behalf of JUFJ, in strong support of SBI54/HB18, Landlord and Tenant - Eviction Action - Right to Counsel.

Our support for this legislation is rooted in Jewish values that recognize the fundamental importance of the home for a person's well-being and the basic obligations of landlord to tenant. The Babylonian Talmud, a sacred text dating back over 1500 years, contains specific guidelines concerning the eviction of tenants (Baba Metzia, 101b). An enduring message is that the needs of the renter must be taken into account.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book about eviction and poverty in America, Matthew Desmond painted a vivid picture of the harm that befalls an individual, a family and its community as a consequence of eviction. It's a toxic blend of psychological instability, emotional turmoil, potential job loss, disruption of children's education, loss of property, and degradation of community spirit.

SBI54 would reduce the likelihood of eviction by enabling renters to have legal representation during eviction proceedings. Currently, landlords in Maryland have some form of representation in Rent Court in ~95% of cases, whereas renters are represented in ~ 5% of cases. Not surprisingly, renters rarely prevail in court. By contrast, in jurisdictions where renters have a right to counsel they are victorious in over 80% of cases.¹ Trends suggest that landlords in these jurisdictions have

¹ Just the Facts: Right to Counsel Stops Evictions in NYC; Right to Counsel NYC Coalition, 2020.

begun to seek remediation more often rather than routinely filing for eviction because they have learned that this is a more cost effective way to resolve disputes. Consequently, renters are far less likely to lose their homes and courts are less overwhelmed with an outrageous number of eviction cases.²

Moreover, a recent report indicated that implementation of the right to counsel in Baltimore City would save the local government ~\$35.6M in expenses for housing, foster care, homeless student transportation, Medicaid, and related expenses for the evicted population.³

In summary, a right to counsel would decrease the frequency of eviction and attendant personal hardships, while reducing the financial cost to the government. **JUFJ therefore respectfully urges a favorable report on SBI 54.**

² In recent years over 600,000 eviction proceedings have been filed annually in Maryland, corresponding to ~80% of rental units. In contrast, the eviction filing rate is ~5% in Pennsylvania and ~16% in Virginia. From Attorney General Brian Frosh, press conference December 28, 2020.

³ The Economic Impact of an Eviction Right to Counsel in Baltimore City; Stout, 2020.