

Hearing of the Housing and Urban Affairs Committee
SB154 Right to Counsel in Eviction Cases
Judicial Proceeding Committee
Position: FAVORABLE
Testimony of Tisha Guthrie
January 28, 2021

Dear Chairperson and Members of the committee:

My name is Tisha Guthrie, a native of Baltimore City, an active member of the Affordable Housing Trust Fund commission, and currently residing in the Mt. Vernon neighborhood. This testimony is to convey our state's dire need for initiatives that address the current power imbalances between landlords and renters and the role of a Right to Counsel (RTC) bill in creating a more equitable relationship. In supporting the establishment of RTC legislation for residents who are facing eviction, we will be assisting families encountering various life altering struggles ranging from income loss to medical and mental health crisis. In the midst of such stressful conditions, having legal assistance to navigate through what can be a very intimidating system is an investment in families, communities and the city at large.

Though under the best of circumstances appropriate representation is essential, COVID-19 has proven this even more crucial. By possibly avoiding a family's disruptive displacement, this bill has the potential to change the trajectory of health, well-being and overall life outcomes. Studies draw a clear line between housing instability, job loss, truancy amongst children, anxiety and a number of other negative outcomes.

Who are those who would most benefit from allocated resources to provide RTC: Black single mothers, people with disabilities, the elderly, children and the working poor. These are the very segments of our population who are most vulnerable and experience some of the highest COVID-19 positivity rates. During this current pandemic it has become painfully clear that the need to address the power disparity can no longer be ignored. Landlords enter rent court with the valuable resource of legal representation, without which virtually guarantees the eviction of renters. Simple legal representation could disrupt this obstacle that stands between vulnerable populations and housing stability. As our city and society seeks to address inequities and the infrastructure that proliferates its legacy, we, in the family of humanity, can never be too vigilant in our work toward realizing true justice for all.

As many families and individuals face harsh economic realities, some pressured into mortgage foreclosures while others can barely afford the cost of rent while also battling food insecurity, politicians are bombarded tirelessly with demands to address these issues. The implementation of new programs or the budget expansion of existing ones is often the suggested remedy. This bill falls right in line as it seeks to empower this given populations. As a commissioner for the AHTF, I am well aware of the already high demand for affordable dwellings. Putting in place legislation that seeks to reduce disruption and housing displacement also works to optimize the AHTF. This bill makes not only good financial sense but also speaks to our moral compass. In light of these various factors, I urge a favorable report for SB154.

Respectfully,

Tisha Guthrie, MSW, LMSW
Bolton House Residents Association (BHRA)

