

Dear Members of the House Judiciary and Environment & Transportation Committees,

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with CASA de Maryland and Renters United. I am a resident of **District 40. I am testifying in support of House Bill 691.**



This bill offers both renters and landlords the power to request and receive postponement of legal proceedings while either party accesses legal counsel, calls witnesses, and/or collects documents. Furthermore, when eviction prevention services—which include counseling, dispute resolution, and civil legal aid—are available in the court building, judges shall allow a recess so either party can use those services.

Beyond illness itself, the pandemic has made renters' lives difficult. These lean economic times have meant thousands of low-income renters find themselves facing eviction. Furthermore, renters are disproportionately persons of color. Even though Maryland has over \$400 million in federal rental assistance available, it takes time to gather necessary documents, apply and process applications. It only makes sense that renters should attain access to these resources when it matters most, in court. Over 100,000 Maryland households are behind on rent and are still struggling to access that federal money.

Society benefits when people are housed. With a secure home, workers can do their best work and support our economy. With a secure home, students can concentrate and learn. With a secure home, parents and children can nurture healthy relationships, avoiding tension and abuse. With a secure home, people don't inadvertently spread disease. Most importantly, separating people from their homes is a cruelty so harsh that it should only be allowed when all opportunities for redress and due process have been provided to those at risk of losing everything. It is in society's interest to prevent evictions. Yet, in the second half of 2021, an average of 650 evictions took place each month. Let's reduce evictions, avoid them whenever possible, for the good of everyone.

I have had my fair share of difficult landlord situations after living in several places in Baltimore City. While I have never been pushed into precarity enough to not pay my rent on time, I've lived in houses well below code that lacked proper heating, had plum sized holes in floors, and exposed electrical wiring, which could have been remedied if I had had the expertise to learn about what my rights were as a renter. It was only when I coincidentally a new friend's mother was a lawyer that specialized in renter's rights that I became aware of all the ways landlords had benefited from my lack of access to experts. Having access to this person's expertise, allowed me resources at the right time, meant I was able to remove illegal terms from lease agreements and negotiate rent reductions when large areas of my home were being repaired for months on end. Access to experts can really make a difference for renters' lives, especially when they are about to be pushed from the precipice into homelessness.

It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of House Bill 691.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Smeton
Baltimore, MD 21211
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore