



**MARYLAND
LEGAL AID**

Advancing
**Human Rights and
Justice for All**

February 27, 2023

The Honorable Chair Brian J. Feldman
Chair of the Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
2 West
Miller Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Maryland Legal Aid's Testimony in Support for Senate Bill 848

Dear Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 848, which would create and establish a Maryland Statewide Rental Assistance Voucher Program. This bill will help to close the affordable housing gap for low-income Marylanders. I submit this testimony on behalf of Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) at the request of Senator Guzzone.

MLA is a non-profit law firm that provides free legal services to the State's low-income and vulnerable residents. MLA handles civil legal cases involving a wide range of issues, including representing people and families struggling with housing and eviction.

There is an affordable housing crisis in this country. The crisis particularly affects extremely low-income families but also has an outsized effect on working people and the elderly. For some of these families, vouchers provide an opportunity to avoid homelessness or to get off of the streets. Though the state has opened its voucher waiting list for some counties on the Eastern Shore the sad fact is many voucher programs throughout the state have closed their waiting list so Marylanders who want to escape homelessness or avoid the potential of being homeless because they are spending more than thirty percent of their income for housing are left with no way out of their dilemma. SB 848 will help some of the 125,00 families who spend more than thirty percent of their income for rent as well the more than 50,000 people who experience homeless each year in Maryland avoid this tragedy¹. However the bill needs to be amended so that it grants a preference for a particular vulnerable population of Marylander's- children aging out of foster care. If this program is to serve them then it must create a preference for these children while also creating exceptions to rules in the federal program that prevent many of these families and children from being eligible when federal based vouchers are available.

The need for this program is brought into sharp focus by the needs of families and children. Housing instability for children aging out of foster care and former foster care youth has been a long-standing

¹ See <https://www.hchmd.org/homelessness-maryland> each year more than 50, 000 people experience homelessness.

problem in Maryland. Many times, aging out of foster care results in a high percentage of homelessness, difficulty obtaining stable housing and employment. These youth who age out of care with no stability are forced to try to find places to sleep; some sleep on the floor or couches of this friend one night and a different person the next night. Sometimes they are in shelters, sometimes with people they do not really know, and for some they are on the streets. These foster children lack a support system. They do not have the same familial safety nets and resources as children who are not in care. Creating a preference for youth aging out of foster care will ensure stable housing which leads to success in all aspects of adulthood.

Current voucher programs do not provide viable options. A Family Unification Program (FUP) voucher rental assistance dedicated to a) FUP-eligible families, and b) youth ages 18 to 24, foster children.² However currently there are no FUP vouchers and none on the horizon in Maryland. The Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) voucher makes Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) assistance available to Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) in partnership with Public Child Welfare Agencies (PCWAs).³ However, there is an extremely lengthy waiting list, or the waiting list is closed. In Montgomery County the FUP vouchers were never really used for children but given more to parents. There is a shortage of vouchers in Montgomery County that foster children can access.

Also, these vouchers are administered locally. Foster youth placed outside their home county are ineligible for a voucher from their home county. They would have to move back to their home county to be eligible for the home county voucher program even if the new area has no vouchers.

Children involved in the child welfare system have experienced trauma and they are among the most vulnerable population in Maryland. SB 848 is a step forward in their journey to becoming productive members of society. Establishing statewide rental assistance would provide foster children with the stability they need to maintain employment and prevent some of the contributing factors to additional children living in unstable homes and experiencing abuse and neglect.

This bill will improve housing stability for low-income Marylanders, especially youth aging out of foster care. **For these reasons, Maryland Legal Aid urges this committee to issue a FAVORABLE report on SB 848.**

Sincerely,

Gregory Countess, Esq.

Director of Advocacy for Housing and Community Economic Development

Maryland Legal Aid

410 951 7687

² A FUP voucher "...applies to youth at least 18 years and not more than 24 years of age (have not reached their 25th birthday) who left foster care, or will leave foster care within 90 days, in accordance with a transition plan described in Section 475(5)(H) of the Social Security Act, and are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless at age 16 or older https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family

³ <https://grantsforus.io/type-of-eligible-entity/organizations/local-government-agencies/foster-youth-to-independence-fyi-competitive-2022/>