

BILL NO: Senate Bill 154
TITLE: Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund – Funding
COMMITTEE: Appropriations and Judiciary
HEARING DATE: March 26, 2025
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

Legal representation is fundamental to safeguarding fair, equal, and meaningful access to the legal system, however the Legal Services Corporation's "Justice Gap" Report found that low-income Americans do not get any or enough legal help for 92% of their substantial civil legal problems. Maryland is only the second state in the nation to have a program that provides access to legal representation to all income qualified persons facing eviction on a statewide basis. We support Senate Bill 0154's allocation of \$14 million in annual funding to the Access to Counsel in Evictions Fund to ensure tenants have a fair eviction proceeding, reduce the high number of eviction proceedings, and keep more Marylanders in their homes.

The Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force 2024 report reflects the experiences of many of our clients in that the trauma of disruptive displacement is particularly harmful for low-income mothers and their children. We concur with their findings that "... eviction results in multiple and multidimensional negative consequences for mothers leading to both 'economic hardships and health problems'" and often negatively affect children's performance in school, behavioral issues, and increased health risks. It is also well-established that the consequences of evictions fall disproportionately on communities of color, especially Black women, who face multiple systems of intersecting oppression. To date, the ACE program has prevented eviction in 3,018 cases, secured additional time to transition housing in 2,559 cases, and closed 8,894 cases statewide, benefiting over 14,000 Marylanders.

We know that litigants with representation are more likely to have a successful outcome than those without representation. Approximately 96% of landlords are represented in court, while tenants with representation number at only 1%. Of the tenants who wished to remain in their homes, an outstanding 88% were able to do so at the conclusion of their case with ACE representation.

Representation through the ACE program balances the scales and saves the state money - for every \$1 invested in ACE, Maryland realizes a return of \$3.50– \$4.80 in fiscal and economic benefits, amounting to an estimated \$46.7 million in FY2024. Legal representation through ACE costs approximately \$1,100 per case, significantly lower than the estimated \$9,700 per household for homelessness interventions. In fact, ACE legal services avoided over \$6 million in direct costs for Maryland residents.

Two years ago, the Maryland Access to Justice Commission found that there are only 1.49 lawyers available to help every 10,000 low-income individuals in Maryland – the Women's Law Center's escalating call volumes are testament to this need as rising inflation, stagnant wages, increasing costs of living, growing income inequality, job insecurity, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted local economies, making it harder for people to maintain their standard of living. By funding the ACE program, the state can help tenants avoid homelessness, retain employment, and maintain stability, reducing the fiscal impact on social services and criminal justice systems. Because we strongly support a civil right to counsel, particularly in areas of the law where fundamental human rights are at stake, the WLC supports SB0154 and permanent funding for the ACE program.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, legal services organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change, working to ensure physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy for women in Maryland.