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SB 154: Access to Counsel in Evictions – Task Force Termination and Special Fund Hearing of the House Appropriations Committee on March 26, 2025

Position: SUPPORT (FAV)

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a nonprofit public interest law firm that stands with tenants to protect and expand their right to safe, habitable, affordable, and non-discriminatory housing and their right to fair and equal treatment by Maryland's landlord-tenant laws, courts, and agencies. PJC seeks the **Committee's Favorable report on SB 154.**

As amended, SB 154 extends for another year the annual distribution of \$14 million from Maryland's Abandoned Property Fund to the Access to Counsel in Evictions (ACE) Special Fund, administered by the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC). This funding supports legal representation for low-income tenants in eviction cases and administrative proceedings related to subsidy termination. SB 154 also transfers administration of the ACE oversight task force from the Attorney General to the Department of Housing and Community Development.

Evictions disproportionately impact Black women, single mothers, and individuals with disabilities—groups already facing systemic inequalities. According to the 2025 Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force Report, 72% of ACE clients identify as Black, and 33% report having a household member with a disability. These numbers highlight the ACE Program's critical role in addressing inequities and supporting vulnerable populations in Maryland. ACE representation levels the legal playing field and ensures that tenants have a fair chance in court.

The ACE Program has demonstrated remarkable success. In FY 2024, ACE attorneys closed over 9,100 cases, benefiting more than 21,000 Marylanders, including 9,100 children. **Approximately 88% of tenants who wished to remain in their homes were able to do so.** Moreover, independent analysis reveals that ACE provides a \$3 return for every \$1 invested, resulting in \$46.7 million in fiscal benefits to the state in FY 2024 alone. These benefits stem from reduced shelter costs, decreased public health expenditures, and improved housing stability.

A baseline of continued funding is essential to the program's sustainability and continued success. While the ACE program currently receives \$14 million annually from the Abandoned Property Fund, this funding is set to expire in 2027. Without SB 154, Maryland risks undermining the progress made in building a more equitable judicial process and reducing the societal costs of displacement.

Maryland courts continued to see over 30,000 eviction filings per month last year, amounting to over 400,000 eviction filings annually. Meanwhile, two-thirds of ACE-represented renters report that they learned about their right to counsel only on their court date. Thus, sustained funding under SB 154 is crucial to continuing to scale up the Program to meet renters' need across the state and will allow for expanded outreach and tenant education that will improve earlier utilization of ACE.

SB 154 is a vital step toward ensuring housing stability and equity for Maryland renters. By securing a baseline of permanent funding for the ACE program for another year, this legislation will protect thousands of families from the traumatic consequences of eviction and strengthen communities across the state.

Public Justice Center is a member of the Renters United Maryland coalition and asks that the Committee issue a **FAVORABLE report on SB 154**. If you have any questions, please contact C. Matthew Hill, hillm@publicjustice.org, (410) 625-9409 Ext. 229.