



**MARYLAND
LEGAL AID**

Advancing
**Human Rights and
Justice for All**

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The Honorable Kumar P. Barve
Chairman, Environment and Transportation Committee
House Office Building,
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**Re: Opposition to House Bill 1199—Real Property-County Rental
Property Licenses-Requirements and Limits**

Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to House Bill 1199, legislation that would provide adequate projections for tenants through licensing requirements but which would limit rental licensing leading to a possible scarcity of rental housing. Maryland Legal Aid, "Legal Aid," is a private, non-profit organization that provides free legal services to indigent Maryland residents. In our 12 offices around the state, we help individuals and families in every county with a wide array of civil legal issues including housing, consumer, public benefits, and family law matters. We also represent abused and neglected children and provide legal assistance to senior citizens and nursing home residents. This letter serves as notice that Gregory Countess will be testifying on behalf of Legal Aid at the request of Delegate Vaughn Stewart.

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that "[e]veryone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including...housing..." In order for this right to be fully realized, the housing must be safe and adequate for human habitation, and must provide for the inhabitants to live "in security, peace, and dignity."¹ In other words, four walls and a floor aren't enough, and it is the state's responsibility to ensure that its residents' rights to live in secure and adequate housing is protected. Housing must also be affordable and sadly HB 1199 erects another barrier to the right to housing.

In the early twentieth century policy makers in local, state and the federal government searched for ways to enshrine a principal blessed by the Supreme Court- separate but equal.

¹ Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, General Comment 4, U.N. Doc. E/1992/23 (1991)

Housing policy choices were made to restrict housing available to African Americans by deed restrictions, zoning regulations, mortgage availability and violence. Today the segregated communities we see throughout this country bear a relationship to that legacy. According to Robert Rothstein in the Color of Law officials “faced two distinct problems: how to keep lower-income African Americans from living near middle-class whites and how to keep middle-class African Americans from buying into white middle-class neighborhoods. He states the federal and local governments developed distinct solutions. Those solutions included efforts to make owning or renting a home prohibitively expensive.”²

Though this bill on its face does none of those things and we don’t impugn the motives of the bill’s sponsor the effect of requiring that all single family properties be licensed and limiting the amount of licenses issued will create a scarcity of rental housing which will drive up rents and limit rental housing availability.

There is already a severe shortage in affordable rental housing. Our clients everyday face choices that would bedevil Solomon- how do you pay for basic necessities like food and medicines for your family if rents eat up 50% of your income. All across the country this is a problem and as stated in a recent article “11 million renter households are severely housing cost-burdened, paying more than half of their limited incomes on rent. The vast majority of them have extremely low incomes, and most are seniors, people with disabilities, or people in the low-wage labor force. With more than half of their limited incomes going to keep roofs over their heads, they are forced to make impossible choices between paying rent and buying groceries, seeing a doctor, or saving for college or a rainy day.”³

In Maryland the problem is just as severe. The State has determined that almost 100, 000 families in Maryland are paying more than 30% of their income for rent (the state’s study does not include the statistics of the largest jurisdictions in the state- an entitlement jurisdiction receives its own federal housing funding and set out the jurisdiction’s problems in a separate report). The problem is just as dire in those jurisdictions like Baltimore County, Baltimore City, Harford County, Anne Arundel County, Montgomery County and Prince Georges County. In fact, in Prince George’s County 78,222 African American households are burdened by the cost of their rental housing.

HB 1199 by requiring that all single family rental housing be licensed has the benefit of helping to ensure safe, decent housing but that benefit is outweighed by the other effects of this bill- making a rental market which is already unaffordable to many of our clients even more expensive by limiting the supply of rental housing. The need of our clients require an expansion of the rental stock with affordable rental options.

² The Color of Law by Richard Rothstein page 48 (2017).

³ See <https://www.citylab.com/perspective/2019/03/affordable-housing-near-me-data-bold-solutions-funding/584779/>

For these reasons we urge an unfavorable report on HB 1199.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gregory Countess", with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Gregory Countess
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