



MARYLAND LEGAL AID

Advancing
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Justice for All

STATEWIDE ADVOCACY SUPPORT UNIT

Cornelia Bright Gordon, Esq.
Director of Advocacy
for Administrative Law
(410) 951-7728
cbgordon@mdlab.org

Gregory Countess, Esq.
Director of Advocacy
for Housing & Community
Economic Development
(410) 951-7687
gcountess@mdlab.org

Anthony H. Davis, II, Esq.
Director of Advocacy
for Consumer Law
(410) 951-7703
adavis@mdlab.org

Erica I. LeMon, Esq.
Director of Advocacy
for Children's Rights
(410) 951-7648
elemon@mdlab.org

Amy Petkovsek, Esq.
Director of Advocacy
for Training & Pro Bono
(410) 951-7813
apetkovsek@mdlab.org

Bobbie Steyer, Esq.
Director of Advocacy
for Family Law
(410) 951-7737
bsteyer@mdlab.org

Julianne Kelly Tarver, Esq.
Director
Pro Bono Program
(410) 951-7642
jkelly@mdlab.org

Meaghan McDermott, Esq.
Director
Community Lawyering Initiative
(410) 951-7635
mmcdermott@mdlab.org

EXECUTIVE STAFF

Wilhelm H. Joseph, Jr., Esq.
Executive Director

Gustava E. Taler, Esq.
Chief Operating Officer

Administrative Offices
500 East Lexington Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
(410) 951-7777
(800) 999-8904
(410) 951-7818 (Fax)

www.mdlab.org
04.2019

March 10, 2020

Honorable Kumar Barve, Chair
House Environment and Transportation Committee
6 Bladen St.
250 House Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 768 Landlord and Tenant – Repossession for Failure to Pay Rent – Registration and License Information

Dear Chairperson Barve and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 768. H.B. 768 is legislation that would require landlords to adequately prove they are in compliance with the rental licensing laws in Baltimore City before pursuing a failure to pay rent complaint against a tenant. 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 Dalya Attar.

Legal Aid's clients are defendants in these summary proceedings throughout the state. Legal Aid reviewed the failure to pay rent practice of all the jurisdictions in the state in a statistical study of complaints filed in 2012. Maryland Legal Aid's rent court study of 2012 cases found that 30% of rent court cases were decided in error.¹ Errors on the face of the complaints and in the trial proceeding were not addressed, and landlords were granted the right to evict tenants when their cases should have been dismissed. The study indicated there were cases when the landlord did not prove its license as required by law but landlords were still granted judgments.

¹ Maryland Legal Aid, Human Rights in Maryland's Rent Courts: A Statistical Study, September 2016, http://www.mdlab.org/wp-content/uploads/MDLegalAid_RentCourtStudy_Release-Date-9-8-16.pdf.



The study found that in 8% of cases where default judgments were entered, the section regarding required license was incomplete or blank. In 21.2 % of the cases studied the records were unclear as to whether the judgment entered complied with state law. In 2011, the Maryland Court of Appeals determined that a landlord cannot use the failure to pay rent process if they have not complied with a residential licensing requirement. *McDaniel v. Baronowski*, 419 Md. 560 (2011). There the Court stated: "In order to invoke the facile process of summary ejectment, a landlord in those jurisdictions requiring licensure, must affirmatively plead and demonstrate that he is licensed at the time of the filing of the complaint for summary ejectment in order to initiate the summary ejectment process." *McDaniel*, at 587. After that ruling, the District Court form was adjusted to include a paragraph about the requirement for a license. However, even with the additional paragraph on the form, judgments were being entered against tenants when that paragraph was completely blank without the court requesting or receiving information regarding the requirement of a license and if the landlord was in compliance with that requirement. H.B. 768 will ensure that the District Court requires landlords comply with Baltimore City licensing requirements before using the quick process in the District Court to collect rent and repossess property from their tenants.

These improvements to the failure to pay rent process will protect the basic human right outlined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which 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..." The failure to pay rent complaint process is the quickest way landlords can regain possession of the property and therefore the quickest way tenants can lose their housing. The improvements in the failure to pay rent process in H.B. 768 will have an impact on protecting the right to housing for Baltimore renters by ensuring that fairness is not lost in the quick nature of the process.

For the above reasons, Maryland Legal Aid respectfully requests that you give H.B. 768 a favorable report.

Sincerely,



Gregory Countess

Assistant Director of Advocacy for Housing and Community Development

gcountess@mdlab.org

410-951-7687