



**Testimony for the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
January 28, 2021**

**SB 154 – Landlord and Tenant – Eviction Action – Right to
Counsel**

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The ACLU of Maryland supports SB 154, which would provide a right to counsel for tenants in eviction proceedings, giving them a fair chance to access legal protections and stay in their homes.

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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, countless individuals and families across Maryland have lost their jobs and ability to pay rent, leaving far too many tenants facing the additional threat of eviction and losing their homes. Unlike in criminal cases, however, there is no right to counsel in eviction proceedings, even though the consequences are severe. Systemic income, wealth, and housing inequalities put communities of color and women – particularly Black women – at disproportionate risk of eviction. In addition to the detrimental impacts on residents' health and safety, and the mental, emotional, and psychological toll that eviction may cause, eviction records often follow people for years, stigmatizing people who are already vulnerable, and creating another barrier to stability.

A recent Stout analysis found that Baltimore City residents without legal representation lost their homes 93 percent of the time in eviction proceedings. The same study found that a \$5.7 million investment in the right to counsel would generate \$35.6 million in benefits to Baltimore City and Maryland, by reducing the social safety net response to disruptive displacement caused by eviction.¹ Last month, citing this study, Baltimore City became the seventh city in the country to ensure that residents facing eviction have legal representation.

It is time for Maryland to take meaningful action to ensure that all people across the state – regardless of circumstances – have access to safe and stable housing, during the pandemic and beyond.

For the foregoing reasons, the ACLU of Maryland urges a favorable vote on SB 154.

¹ Stout Risius Ross, LLC. *The Impact of an Eviction Right to Counsel in Baltimore City*. May 8, 2020. <http://bmorerentersunited.org/rtc/stoutreport/>