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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB18/SB154
Landlord and Tenant – Eviction Action – Right to Counsel

TO: Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Atterbeary, and members of the Judiciary Committee
FROM: Michael English

My name is Michael English. I live in Silver Spring Maryland in District 20. This testimony is in support of HB18, Right to Counsel legislation. HB18 would help make sure the most vulnerable among us are protected at one of the most trying times in our history. There are several reasons I support this bill, but I think telling you a bit about my own housing story could help explain why it is so important to me.

While I was fortunate enough to buy a condo in downtown Silver Spring a little over a year ago, I rented in the area since 2012, and am no more or less a part of the community than I was when I lived a half mile down the road in a place where my name wasn't on the deed. Renters make up the lifeblood of many areas in Montgomery County and across the state, yet even before the pandemic, they face less long term stability due to rising costs over time, and more uncertainty in their living situation. While rents have settled down a bit during the pandemic, this reprieve is likely temporary and, more to the point, has been replaced with a more acute and devastating one, displacement and job loss from the crippling economic impacts of the ongoing pandemic.

Safe and stable housing has far reaching economic, health, and social benefits to individuals, families, and communities, and is key to reducing racial inequities, as the most marginalized are often the first to have their housing threatened. Renters are more likely to work the very kind of food service, customer service, retail, and other jobs that have been decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic and related closure orders. These measures are necessary from a public health standpoint, but when we don't give people the ability to earn the money needed to pay rent, we can't allow them to risk being kicked out on the street without fair representation,

without even a fighting chance at having their case heard with the help of someone who knows the system. This bill, sponsored by Senator Fisher and Delegate Hettleman, would make a simple, but important and targeted reform to solve exactly this problem.

The bill would provide low-income tenants with the right to legal counsel and representation in rent court. This may sound basic, obvious even, but it's a sharp departure from what happens now. Currently, only 1% of tenants in rent court are represented, while 98% of landlords have legal or professional agent representation. How can we expect a fair outcome when representation levels are so different? A day in rent court is one of the scariest days in a person's life, they are worried about being homeless, about being ruined, and are just plain scared, and 99% of them go through this alone. That's just not right. Establishing a right to counsel would not only help renters by reducing evictions, it would save the state \$18.1 million (if Baltimore City renters were provided with right to counsel), in addition to similar savings in local jurisdictions.

Obviously, throwing people out on the streets during a pandemic is a risk to their health and others with the lack of access to privacy and sanitation. Further, even if those evicted can shelter with friends or family, that is more people in a smaller space, risking further community spread of COVID. Keeping people housed is in everyone's interest.

Please do the right thing and pass this bill. Thank you and **I urge a favorable report on HBI8/SB154.**