



EXPANDING ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR 40 YEARS

MARYLAND SENATE BUDGET AND FINANCE COMMITTEE
TESTIMONY OF MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE
IN SUPPORT OF HB1196: TAX SALES – ALTERNATIVE COLLECTION
PROGRAMS
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30, 2022

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Chair Guzzone and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Amy Hennen and I am the Director of Advocacy and Financial Stabilization at the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS). MVLS is the oldest and largest provider of pro bono civil legal services to low-income Marylanders. MVLS was founded in 1981 by a group of concerned Maryland lawyers, legal services providers and leadership of the Maryland State Bar Association. Since then, our statewide panel of over 1,700 volunteers has provided free legal services to over 100,000 Marylanders in a wide range of civil legal matters. In FY21, MVLS volunteers provided legal services to 3,353 people across the state. As part of our tax sale foreclosure work, we see numerous clients at risk of losing their housing due to not receiving applicable tax credits. For the reasons explained below, we respectfully request a favorable report on House Bill 1196.

MVLS represents clients who face losing their homes due to unpaid property taxes. Tax sale often affects the poorest homeowners in the most distressed neighborhoods and contributes to vacant and abandoned properties all over the state. In 2013, MVLS and other nonprofit organizations came together to form the Tax Sale Workgroup. Our goal was to protect communities and homeowners, especially people with lower incomes and the elderly, who face the most devastating effects of the tax sale process. Since 2014, MVLS has maintained a partnership with the Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland to conduct annual tax sale workshops aimed at helping homeowners avoid tax sale. In the past four years, volunteers have assisted over 350 people at these workshops.

From the data we collected at our 2020 tax sale clinics, 72% of clients are seniors, 48% were disabled, 85% identified as Black, and 72% reported a household income of \$30,000 or less per year. Many of these clients survive on fixed incomes and struggle to pay their bills even before a tax sale happens. We also found that most homeowners live in multigenerational households where they provide shelter and support for their children and grandchildren.

Victoria is an MVLS client whose home went into tax sale during the height of the pandemic. Enduring job loss, sickness, and the other issues that came along with COVID-19, she paid her property taxes on the deadline. However, the home was sold at tax sale. She came to MVLS for help after receiving notice that the lien purchaser filed to foreclose her right of redemption. Victoria should have never gone to tax sale because she had proof of payment and an error resulted in her home being included in the tax sale. It took a volunteer attorney several months to resolve the confusion.

MVLS has been fighting to even the playing field for low-income Marylanders for decades, and we know that poor Marylanders are most often forced to face tax sale without an advocate. This imbalance of power makes it more likely that our clients will continue to struggle to get out of tax sale. We support HB1196 because it would give cities and counties options when trying to assist vulnerable clients like Victoria. Consequently, we urge a favorable report.

Mister Chair and members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify.