

To the members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee and the Budget and Taxation Committee,

I am a resident of District 21 and a member of Showing Up for Racial Justice Annapolis and Anne Arundel County. **I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 662.**

The human need for housing is central. **Having safe, stable housing is key to a healthy society, and we know that it is key to reducing racial inequities.** We as a society have the responsibility to make sure homes are affordable and built safely and that people can remain in their homes. These obligations have taken on even more urgency in the past two years: all people should be able to stay in their homes, especially during a pandemic. Because of the pandemic, many are confronting increased economic hardship, the shortcomings of eviction prevention policy, and the extreme threat to health resulting from being unhoused. One critical intervention that can help keep thousands of Marylanders housed right now is access to a lawyer.

Last year, the General Assembly passed HB18 to establish access to counsel for low-income renters, but a separate bill to fund the program did not pass. It is past time for this law to be funded. Establishing a program to help renters access legal counsel would reduce evictions; save the state tens of millions of dollars in reduced Medicaid and foster care costs related to the unhoused, with similar savings in local jurisdictions; and keep people in their homes.

HB 18 went into effect as of October 1, 2021, creating the **Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force**. This task force was charged with providing an [initial annual report](#) with input from stakeholders within 90 days. The task force's report, "**encourages the Governor to allocate a portion of federal stimulus money to kick-start the program. But a stable source of funding is critical to ensure long-term success of the program, which is why the Task Force recommends an annual, ongoing appropriation from the State's operating budget.**"

It is critical that state money be allocated so that renters have access to counsel, since, according to the Task Force, "**over 90% of housing providers are represented and over 90% of tenants are not.**" This imbalance turns rent court into a rubber stamp for landlords wishing to penalize renter for any reason, no matter how capricious and unfair. We must remedy this issue in order to give the vast majority of renters a chance to challenge their evictions.

SB0662 would require that the Comptroller distribute \$11,800,000 of certain abandoned property funds to the Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund for fiscal year 2023.

It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of Senate Bill 662.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,

Linda K. Girdner
941 Fall Ridge Way
Gambrills, MD 21054