

Dear Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings and Budget & Taxation Committees,

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with CASA de Maryland and Renters United. I am a resident of MD **District 40. I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 662.**



Senate Bill 662 would transfer \$11,800,000 from the Abandoned Property Fund to the Access to Counsel in Evictions Fund for FY2023.

In 2020, and as a result of the devastating economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Maryland Office of the Attorney General (OAG) partnered with the Maryland Access to Justice Commission to establish the "COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force." One of the task force's recommendations was to reduce the number of evictions in Maryland. In response to this recommendation, the Maryland General Assembly passed HB 18 during its 2021 session. This bill, in part, created a right to counsel program that will provide low-income tenants across the state with access to legal representation in eviction proceedings. The law went into effect as of October 1, 2021, creating the Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force.

Relying on court data and analysis from Stout Risius Ross, the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) estimates that there are 29,683 limited-income residents who have an unmet need for legal representation in eviction cases. MLSC estimates that with an additional allocation of \$11.8 million for FY 23, the State can meet approximately 1/3 of that need. This funding is only part of the puzzle, but is an essential part of ensuring low-income renters aren't displaced and forced into a state of homelessness.

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. This is especially difficult for female-headed households and black households, who were evicted 46% and 195% more frequently than their male and white households respectively in Baltimore City between 2017 and 2018. The legislature already affirmed the belief that this is not a just state of things, so it's time to put our money where our mouths are.

I have had my fair share of difficult landlord situations after living in several places in Baltimore City. While I have never been pushed into precarity enough to not pay my rent on time, I've lived in houses well below code that lacked proper heating, had plum sized holes in floors, and exposed electrical wiring, which could have been remedied if I had had the expertise to learn about what my rights were as a renter. It was only when I coincidentally a new friend's mother was a lawyer that specialized in renter's rights that I became aware of all the ways landlords had benefited from my lack of access to experts. Having access to this person's expertise, allowed me resources at the right time, meant I was able to remove illegal terms from lease agreements and negotiate rent reductions when large areas of my home were being repaired for months on end. Access to experts can really make a difference for renters' lives, especially when they are about to be pushed from the precipice into homelessness

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,
Jonathan Smeton
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Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore