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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF BILL SB0662/HB0724
Access to Counsel (ATC) in Evictions Special Fund - Funding

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Anna Levy

My name is Anna T Levy, a resident of Rockville, MD, District 16. I am submitting this testimony in support of SB0662/HB0724, Access to Counsel (ATC) in Evictions Special Fund - Funding.

Safe and stable housing has far reaching economic, health, and social benefits to individuals, families, and communities, and is key to reducing racial inequities. Renters routinely have little agency when faced with threats to maintaining stable housing. As a Jewish person, I am taught that all people should have *dei machsoro*, resources sufficient for each person's needs. (Deut. 15:7-8) Consequently, society has an obligation to make sure that people can stay in their homes, especially during a time of pandemic.

Over 655,000 eviction cases were filed pre-pandemic each year in the State of Maryland among 805,000 renter households. A study of eviction actions in one local jurisdiction found that while only 1% of tenants are represented in eviction proceedings, approximately 96% of landlords are represented by an attorney or specialized agent in such cases. Providing a right to counsel to tenants in eviction cases is a proven means of preventing displacement of families and the resulting social, economic, and public health costs of loss of home. Renters who don't have the advantage of an attorney are typically unable to defend themselves even when they have a legitimate defense that would help to avoid eviction. Evictions create significant costs for state and local government related to funding for shelter and education, as well as health care provided in hospitals instead of by community-based providers, transportation costs for homeless youth, and foster care. An estimate from Renters United Maryland suggests the State would benefit from savings of \$62M for services described above if tenants had access to legal representation. Notably, evictions have a disparate impact on Black and brown households in Maryland. Reducing the numbers of evictions would help to reduce significant racial inequities and strengthen the financial status of individuals and our communities.

In 2021, the MD General Assembly passed the Access to Council bill, HB18, establishing Access to Counsel to provide legal service to low-income tenants. However, no source of funding was established to support these critical services. The recent Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force report calls on the State to allocate \$11.8 million to support the program in FY2023 and move to full implementation in FY2025. SB0662/HB0724 would transfer \$11.8 million from the Abandoned Property Fund to the Access to Counsel in Evictions Fund in FY2023. This would help over 9,700 at-risk Maryland families avoid eviction this year. Funding from federal money has been available to local legal services providers to successfully represent thousands of residents facing eviction or eviction-related issues and help them to remain in safe housing. However, these federal funds are running out. Legal services providers

already cannot meet the current needs for representation. **Therefore it is now even more critical that funding for Access to Counsel be allocated.**

I respectfully urge a strong report from the Committee in support of passage of SB0662/HB0724.