

SB0662_ClaireLanders_FAV

Claire Landers, Baltimore, MD, 21209

TESTIMONY ON SB0662 - FAVORABLE
Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund - Funding

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

FROM: Claire Landers

My name is Claire Landers. I am a resident of Baltimore County in District 11 and submit this testimony in support of SB0662 to provide funding for Access to Counsel in Evictions.

I strongly support SB0662 because of my experience as a volunteer observer in Baltimore City Rent Court as part of The Abell Foundation study conducted by the Public Justice Center (PJC) and Right to Housing Alliance. Observing dozens of cases churn through Rent Court was a stunning revelation: Rent Court appeared to operate with less due process and judicial mercy toward tenants than Traffic Court proceedings I have been a part of, where drivers are afforded every opportunity to challenge and explain every manner of violation, from the minor to very serious. Some drivers pay attorneys to advocate for them to retain their driver's license. In Traffic Court, the majority of drivers receive reductions in violations and consequences; they leave the courtroom able to get behind the wheel and drive again.

Rent Court does not operate as we expect an American courtroom would for one reason: The vast majority of tenants do not have lawyers - and they need them. Virtually every renter I observed stood on their own, without having basic knowledge of their rights as a tenant nor legal background to advocate effectively for themselves. I saw tenants often *attempt* to make their case to the judge, explaining non-payment of rent with photos and paperwork evidence of disrepair, mold, rodent infestation or other problems. Yet, judges regularly informed tenants that "today's proceeding is not about evidence or disputes," but was limited to the question of whether or not the tenant had paid rent and should be subject to eviction. It was a grueling process to witness repeatedly. I can only imagine how devastating it was for renters who left court with an order to pack up and leave their home.

I venture to say that no one on this esteemed committee would ever have themselves - or the people they care about - appear without counsel in a legal proceeding that holds dire consequences: In the case of Rent Court, that means losing the roof over your head. It is incumbent upon us all to ensure that Maryland's rent courts become more fair and more equitable to all parties; that goal requires funding lawyers for those who can't afford one. I respectfully urge members of this committee to support SB0662 with a favorable report.