



**SB0564 - Landlord and Tenant and Wrongful Detainer Actions – Eviction
Prevention Services**

**Hearing before the House Judiciary Committee,
March 30, 2022**

Position: SUPPORT (FAV)

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Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility (CPSR) is a statewide evidence-based organization of over 940 physicians and other health professionals and supporters that addresses existential public health threats: nuclear weapons, the climate crisis, and the issues of pollution and toxic effects on health, as seen through the intersectional lens of environmental, social, and racial justice.

SB0564 would make effective use of existing eviction prevention services when they are needed most: at court, on the day of trial of an eviction case. Under SB0564, “eviction prevention service provider” is defined to include legal assistance, financial assistance, mediation, and social or counseling services. The bill targets Maryland’s rapid “summary” court procedures for evicting renters – Failure to Pay Rent, Tenant Holding Over, and Breach of Lease.

Chesapeake PSR supports eviction prevention services because evictions cause physical and mental harm, contribute to the racial disparities in health¹, increase homelessness which in turn increases mortality. Below are some of the deleterious health effects of evictions.

Young children exposed to overcrowding and/or multiple moves in one year, were more often reported by their caregivers to have poor health, food insecurity, impaired educational, social or

¹ <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2031947>

emotional skills, and were measured to have low weight compared to other children.² In older children and adolescents, a history of multiple moves has been associated with mental health problems later in life including violence and suicide.³ In adults, eviction filings are associated with increased suicides and evictions with increased use of emergency rooms and increased all-cause mortality.⁴

The highest mortality from a study in Boston, before the pandemic, was experienced by the unsheltered homeless, having a 5-10 x higher mortality than the adult population of Massachusetts without housing problems.⁵ Evictions are an important cause of homelessness.⁶ These studies were all reported before COVID19 pandemic.

Now with the pandemic, estimates are that homeless people who become sick with COVID-19 are twice as likely to be hospitalized, two to four times as likely to require critical care, and two to three times as likely to die than the general population.⁷ One study found that policies that reduce evictions and utility shut offs were effective in reducing COVID 19 infections and deaths.⁸ During this COVID-19 pandemic, evictions have been linked to a 5-fold increase in mortality from COVID-19 in general, extending the harm to the greater community.⁹ Though during this pandemic, we all benefit when people remain housed, even after the pandemic is over, housing is health and this bill will help reduce evictions and the health consequences we have described.

In these court proceedings SB0564 would provide consistency in allowing parties' a reasonable time, through recess or continuance, to become better prepared for trial or to engage with services aimed at avoiding trial and eviction altogether. **Without SB0564, eviction prevention services are hamstrung by judges' discretion not to allow a recess/continuance and landlords' objections** to any delay of trial that benefits their tenants.

Continuances under SB0564

Foremost, this bill operationalizes tenants' access to counsel in eviction proceedings. When a self-represented litigant comes before a judge in an eviction case and requests additional time to seek attorney representation, SB0564 would require the judge to grant a delay for 5 business days.

This provision recognizes that while 2021's House Bill 18 established an Access to Counsel in Evictions mandate, it did not provide a procedure by which the courts would ensure that tenants who desire counsel may reliably obtain it before trial. Although legal and financial assistance information is more available than ever because of HB18, the efforts of multiple governmental

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3134514/>

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749379716301180>

⁴ <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hpb20210315.747908/full/health-affairs-brief-appendix-eviction-health-himmelstein.pdf>

⁵ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2687991>

⁶ https://www.law.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/upload_documents/evictions_collinson_reed.pdf

⁷ https://works.bepress.com/dennis_culhane/237/

⁸ https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28394/w28394.pdf

⁹ <https://academic.oup.com/aje/article/190/12/2503/6328194>

agencies, and the Judiciary's Help Centers, concern remains that litigants appear in eviction actions realizing too late that they would benefit from assistance and that they need certain evidence to prove assertions about payments, notices, lease provisions, or property conditions. **Evidence for the effectiveness of right to counsel the first two years of New York City's RTC's five-year phase-in, 84% of the tenants who had a lawyer were not evicted. And in zip codes where right to counsel were implemented in 2017, evictions were reduced 29%. Evictions have been reduced by 41% since 2013, funding started for right to counsel. In 2019 alone, evictions in NYC were down 15%.¹⁰**

SB0564 fills an important access-to-justice gap by creating a mandatory-if-requested continuance of 5 workdays or longer by the judge's discretion. This continuance provision also applies to litigants who request time to bring back to court necessary evidence or witnesses or time to engage an eviction service provider such as the Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution or an Emergency Rental Assistance Program.

Recesses under SB0564

This bill also recognizes that litigants need consistency in their access to the legal services, rental assistance programs, and mediation programs that are increasingly available at court during eviction dockets.

- Legal services programs are now providing day-of-trial, first-come-first-serve assistance in Anne Arundel County, Baltimore County, Baltimore City, Caroline County, Dorchester County, Montgomery County, Prince George's County, Queen Anne's County, and Wicomico County.
- The District Court Help Centers are available for in-person assistance in nine court locations (Baltimore City, Catonsville, Cambridge, Frederick, Glen Burnie, Hagerstown, Rockville, Salisbury, Upper Marlboro).
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution was conducting day-of-trial mediations in eviction cases in several jurisdictions, including Baltimore City, Montgomery County, and Wicomico County.

SB0564 would require simply that courts provide "a reasonable amount of time" during an eviction docket to allow a requesting litigant to engage with these eviction prevention services that are available during the docket. Reliable access to a recess would reduce the need for continuances, as pro bono attorneys, mediators, and others would have more time to assist parties during their first appearance at court.

SB0564 is about the future of Maryland's eviction process

¹⁰ https://www.righttocounselnyc.org/right_to_counsel_power_to_organize_campaign

In 2021, amid pandemic-caused scheduling delays, a federal moratorium on evictions, and the unprecedented availability of emergency rent relief, Maryland saw over 355,000 evictions actions filed – nearly a 50-percent reduction in eviction litigation compared to 2019. Actual evictions fell in 2021 by nearly 70 percent compared to 2019. A fairer, more preventative eviction procedure under SB0564 is about the future – when there will not be pandemic protocols that delay trial or hundreds of millions in federal assistance to cover rental debt.

Currently, the Failure to Pay Rent procedure (Real Property § 8-401(e)(1)) allows judges the authority to continue a case for one day only. Other eviction procedures do not provide even that. While cities and states across the country have met the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic by standing up eviction diversion initiatives, often with the leadership of their courts, Maryland has not done so. Even if the Maryland Judiciary sought full funding for an eviction diversion initiative through the National Center for State Courts, for example, our courts would not be able to move forward without fundamental changes to eviction procedures as set forth in SB0564.¹¹ It is an important step toward a policy of using eviction trial dates to problem-solve and reach alternatives that do not place Maryland renters at risk of losing their homes and losing their mental and physical well-being.

The author of a recent article in the New England Journal of Medicine concluded that “housing is too often viewed as a commodity or a business, rather than as a social determinant of health. A national recognition of housing as a fundamental need could catalyze the changes necessary to ensure that everyone has a safe and stable home — an essential element for health.”¹² We in CPSR agree. A shortage of affordable housing driving up rental prices and low wages had left IN 2016, more than 56% of Baltimore renters “rent burdened,” paying more than 30% of their income on rent.¹³ The problem of evictions preceded the pandemic which just brought this problem to light and requires us to find solutions that extend beyond COVID-19. SB0564 represents an attempt to begin to build that solution.

Chesapeake PSR is a member of the Renters United Maryland, a statewide coalition of renters, organizers, and advocates, and **we urge the Committee’s report of Favorable on SB0564.**

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¹¹ <https://www.ncsc.org/information-and-resources/improving-access-to-justice/eviction-resources/eviction-diversion-initiative-grant-program>

¹² <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2031947>

¹³ <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2016/05/in-baltimore-even-full-time-working-families-cant-afford-housing/482190/>