

SUPPORT

SB 756 – Access to Counsel in Evictions - Funding

*Testimony of
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Homeless Persons Representation Project*

The Homeless Persons Representation Project is a non-profit legal services organization providing free legal representation to people who are housing insecure on legal issues that will lead to an end to homelessness. HPRP advocates assist families and individuals in approximately 15 community-based legal clinics in shelters, soup kitchens, US Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers, and other locations. We handle more than 1,000 cases each year to help persons obtain stable housing and critical public benefits like food stamps, veterans' benefits, health care, and more.

The Homeless Persons Representation Project, Inc. (HPRP) supports SB756. The permanent funding contemplated by SB756 will guarantee that Maryland civil legal service organizations can continue to provide community members with a fair chance of preventing eviction under the law. Access to civil legal services, especially in housing matters, can be the difference between poverty and economic stability. Without legal counsel, individuals start at a disadvantage and may face considerable discrimination in court proceedings. In eviction cases, 81% of landlords have legal representation, while only 3% of tenants do, according to Maryland Legal Services Corporation. This is a striking imbalance of power.

Civil legal service organizations are standing at the ready to be crucial partners in the systemic transformation offered by the Access to Counsel Initiative. The advocacy and services provided by civil legal organizations not only address past harms but can move Maryland toward the economic and social equity so often championed by Maryland's policymakers.

But to be effective, the Access to Counsel initiative must include a lasting financial investment. The number of individuals that need assistance and qualify for legal services has grown substantially in the last several years. This increased need has heightened the need for well-trained, dedicated legal advocates. Legal services organizations with uncertain funding sources have faced significant barriers to successful recruitment and retention. Qualified applicants seek positions that afford competitive compensation, professional development, and meaningful work. Legal organizations such as HPRP must have guaranteed resources to strengthen our organizational health. Without this investment, our impact on the communities we serve will be limited. This includes offering equitable compensation to our employees, bolstering operations with excellent administrative support, and securing financial stability for our programs and services.

Uncertain funding is a barrier to both recruiting and retaining outstanding legal advocates. Competitive compensation is critical to the sustained health of the legal organizations tasked with providing legal services for evictions. Persistent open positions are a detriment to morale, increase the work burden for remaining staff, disadvantage clients, and undercut our mission.

Access to Counsel is not charity but an essential investment in human rights and dignity. Moreover, investment in civil legal services stimulates significant economic benefits for communities, state and local governments, and individuals. For example, studies in several states illustrate that civil legal aid positively affects the housing market, increases workforce and wage potential, and removes barriers to economic stability.

With continued funding in this crucial area, the Homeless Persons Representation Project and its partners can continue to build on the success of our collaboration, ensuring coordinated coverage and a smooth process for tenants facing eviction. With this broad collaboration, combining the strengths of both volunteer and staffed attorney program models, we can cover as many dockets as possible and provide quality representation to tenants throughout Maryland.

HPRP strongly urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB756. Please contact Kirsten Gettys Downs (kgettysdowns@hprplaw.org) with questions or for additional information.