

TESTIMONY OF RONALD WEICH
DEAN OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE SCHOOL OF LAW
IN SUPPORT OF SB 756
BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE
MARYLAND SENATE

March 1, 2023

Good afternoon Chairman Guzzone, Vice-Chair Rosapepe and members of the Committee. The University of Baltimore School of Law supports Senate Bill 756 to establish a permanent funding mechanism for the Maryland Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund. Access to legal counsel is a critical component of a fair judicial system, particularly when the stakes for individual litigants are high. The evidence is overwhelming that the outcome of an eviction can devastate individual families, and disproportionately affects communities of color.

Maryland has made significant strides toward providing a more equitable legal process through the Access to Counsel in Evictions (ACE) legislation passed last year. The General Assembly aimed for full implementation of the ACE Program by October 2025, and the Maryland Legal Services Corporation and its grantees have made substantial progress on implementation in the last year. Now it is time for the Maryland General Assembly to ensure the success of the ACE Program by making the funding permanent.

The implementation of Access to Counsel in Evictions is an extraordinary undertaking and will require many more lawyers trained and committed to representing tenants across the state of Maryland. As one of the two Maryland law schools, the University of Baltimore School of Law is committed to doing our part to train and cultivate a pipeline of new attorneys committed to working on issues of housing justice. Our students come to law school to seek meaningful work about which they are passionate. However, financial constraints often mean that students must choose between positions that align with their values, and those that will provide them with a larger paycheck. We want to eliminate this difficult choice where we can, by funding students to engage in important public service across the state.

Our law school received an ACE grant, with which we have established a new Housing Justice Fellowship Program. Through this program, we are able to provide stipends to students working in law offices across Maryland providing tenants with in-court representation. In the past academic year, we have funded eight part-time placements, serving clients in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Montgomery County, Prince George's County and the Eastern Shore of Maryland. We plan to fund several students working full-time this summer.

Ultimately, we hope to inspire students to pursue careers in housing justice. We have partnered with Maryland Legal Aid to select a post-graduate fellow, who will receive a waiver of the final year of law school tuition to incentivize the fellow to pursue a career as a housing rights attorney. Additionally, we have created a new Housing Justice Law course, which is fully enrolled in its first semester. This

course examines legal and policy issues concerning housing instability, including the origins of current housing inequalities, the current eviction crisis, and fair housing law. The course challenges students to consider the role of lawyers in addressing housing instability, and explore various forms of housing advocacy, including eviction defense, impact litigation and policy reform.

In its first year, our Housing Justice Fellowship program has drawn significant student engagement. We hope that, with continued funding, we can continue to raise the profile of housing justice work at our law school and provide students with the learning opportunities they will need to become effective housing rights advocates. We support permanent funding of the ACE Program so that we can achieve that goal. I urge the committee's favorable report on SB 756.