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LEGAL SERVICES**
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March 1, 2023

The Honorable Guy Guzzone
Chair, Budget and Taxation Committee
3 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Senate Bill 756
Access to Counsel in Evictions – Funding
Position: FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 756, a bill that will ensure that the Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund remains funded through a permanent and ongoing appropriation in the State's annual budget.

Community Legal Services of Prince George's County, Inc. (CLS), is a non-profit organization established to provide civil legal services to low-income residents of Prince George's and surrounding Counties. In 2018, CLS piloted an Eviction Prevention Program in Prince George's County which provides free, same-day and extended representation to low-income tenants facing eviction. Due to the success of this program, and the demonstrated need, our office created a similar program in 2020 which provides legal representation to low-income tenants in Anne Arundel County.

Since 2018, CLS has provided representation in more than 3,000 cases. We have provided legal advice in more than 5,000 cases, and our services have benefitted more than 19,000 individuals. Through our representation, we prevented numerous evictions, argued against illegal fees, defective complaints, and notices, negotiated settlements and repayment agreements, connected tenants with rental assistance and other social services resources, advocated on behalf of tenants who dealt with significant housing defects, prevented termination of housing subsidies, filed motions on behalf of tenants seeking additional time to avoid eviction, and hosted community outreach and Know-Your-Rights events to educate and empower the community, to name a few.

Prior to the pandemic, evictions were, and continue to be, a significant problem in Maryland. It is no secret that Maryland has one of the lowest eviction filing fees compared to other states. The average filing fee nationwide is \$120, while the filing fee in Maryland is just about \$15.

In addition to this, Landlords are often given the opportunity to consult with lawyers before filing landlord tenant actions, and can be represented by agents or attorneys in court, whereas tenants are often served with a court summons a few days before their hearings, often leaving no time to seek legal advice or representation in advance. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the eviction crisis in Maryland, and has led to a significant increase in the number of tenants who were financially devastated by the pandemic, with a disproportionate impact on minority and poverty-stricken communities.

Statistics show that there is a significant difference in outcome between tenants who are and who aren't represented at their rent court hearings, as tenants who are represented are more likely to raise defenses and are more likely to be aware of eviction protections. Tenants with representation are also more likely to remain housed, obtain resources beyond their court hearings such as rental assistance, and negotiate for more time allowing them to make payments and seek additional services to avoid eviction. For these reasons, we are tremendously grateful that Maryland has passed the Access to Counsel in Evictions legislation, and we are already seeing the impact of these new laws. Additionally, funding through Access to Counsel has allowed many offices like ours to increase staff to ensure that we are able to meet the increased demand in need. Without continued funding, there is simply no way that legal services providers would be able to continue to do the work we do, and it would likely result in a significant reduction in staff and consequently, an increase in unrepresented tenants who are more vulnerable to eviction.

Continued funding is necessary to ensure that legal services providers like ours can continue to meet the increased demand in need from low-income tenants facing eviction in Maryland.

For the reasons stated above,
CLS urges a FAVORABLE report on SB 756.

If you have any questions, please contact Kayla Williams-Campbell, Managing Attorney, at Williams@clspgc.org, 240-391-6532.