



Cannabis Bill - SB516 – Friendly Amendment
HEARING BEFORE THE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
MARCH 9, 2023
POSITION: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENT

The Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland (“PBRC”), an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is the statewide thought leader and clearinghouse for volunteer civil legal services in Maryland. PBRC provides training, mentorship, and pro bono service opportunities to members of the private bar and offers direct legal services through free legal clinics. **PBRC urges support of SB 516 with a friendly amendment to dedicate 10% of cannabis tax revenue to an existing Special Fund administered by the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) whose grantees provide vital legal services to the residents of communities most impacted by the war on drugs and the disproportionate enforcement of the cannabis prohibition.**

This Amendment will create essential revenue for the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) to provide critical civil legal services, including those provided by PBRC in areas such as housing rights, to some of the most vulnerable residents of our state.

MLSC funding comprised 29% of PBRC’s budget in fiscal year 2022 and is anticipated to rise to close to 60% for FY23. Our projects include home preservation (covering tax sale and foreclosure prevention), consumer protection, family reunification, senior stability, eviction prevention and tenant advocacy. These projects incorporate extensive volunteer service components through community and courthouse clinics and offer vital civil legal services to thousands of clients in need. We also recruit, train, and engage hundreds of volunteer lawyers in the myriad of civil legal areas that impact low-income individuals and refer them to other legal services providers so they can offer high quality legal services to their client populations.

In fiscal year 2022, PBRC volunteers and staff closed 2,427 cases through its projects. In the vast majority of cases, clients represented by PBRC volunteers and staff prevailed or received positive outcomes: we prevented unlawful evictions, significantly reduced consumer debt collections, saved homes from tax sale, preserved intergenerational wealth by drafting life-planning documents to pass properties to family members, and facilitated legal education and outreach. Our work predominantly impacts lower income neighborhoods and people of color. Success rates for our clients ranged from 99% in consumer protection cases, to almost 78% for our tax sale prevention clinics, and 94% of clients either avoided an eviction entirely or were granted a postponement delaying the eviction through our Tenant Volunteer Lawyer of the Day Programs in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. **Grant funding from MLSC helps make these outcomes possible.**

During FY22, PBRC increased its staff and its reach because of funding from MLSC. With this additional staff, we have tripled the number of cases we have been able to handle in Rent Court alone. We have also expanded the types of cases for which we can provide representation. Yet there are consistently more clients in court than we have the capacity to represent. More help is needed to continue this important work of stabilizing communities by helping families avoid homelessness. We can provide this help – but not without the stable

and consistent funding from MLSC. This funding must remain stable so we can continue to hire additional staff and maintain the current programming and staff.

It is a common misconception that cases in rent court are simple cases where the only issue is whether a tenant has paid the rent alleged. While cases may appear simple at first, they can quickly become complicated. It is not unusual to have a dispute over a ledger or late fees, issues related to conditions in the home causing a danger to the life, health or safety of the tenant, or questions about licensing or who is included in the lease. In over 96% of these cases, landlords are represented either by an attorney or an agent who knows the law and the court processes. **Thus, tenants whose housing is at state must have counsel to ensure complicated matters are sorted out in an expedient and fair way. Low-income seniors also need legal help to prepare legal documents safeguarding their homes and passing their property onto their heirs, and attorneys with expertise to help avoid tax sales and mortgage foreclosures among the myriad of legal issues facing vulnerable populations in our state.**

These are just a few of the many areas that will benefit from additional funding allotted to MLSC through the friendly amendment being offered to SB 516.

PBRC supports Legal Aid of Maryland's friendly amendment to SB 516, which would help secure critical funding for the Maryland Legal Services Corporation and its grantees. Without these funds for representation, thousands of Marylanders will encounter homelessness, unemployment, family instability and entrenched poverty.

For the above reasons,

PBRC urges a FAVORABLE report on SB 516 with Amendment.

Please contact Sharon E. Goldsmith, Executive Director of PBRC, with any questions.

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