



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 370
Community Schools – Rental Assistance for Community School Families
Program and Fund - Establishment
House Appropriation Committee
Tuesday, March 26, 2024
FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Barnes and Vice Chair Chang and members of the House Appropriation Committee,

The University of Maryland School of Social Work's **Center for Restorative Change** and **Family Connections Baltimore (Initiatives at the University)** strongly supports **SB 370** which will establish a rental assistance program for eligible community school families to receive funding to support the cost of rental and utility payments, rental and utility arrears, and late fees associated with rental and utility payments from a designated funds for up to twelve months.

Family Connections Baltimore's mission is to provide support to families when they need it, in ways that work for each family. For over 20 years, Family Connections has worked with families in Baltimore City who are experiencing complex trauma including experiences with poverty, racism, and oppression. Family Connections is a community-based family centered program, engaging in a variety of service interventions, research activities, and teaching and learning collaboratives, including initiatives that inform policy development related to the negative effects of disinvestment and structural segregation in Baltimore City. Family Connections clinicians work closely with Community School Coordinators, Student Support Teams, school social workers, and other school staff to develop a multi-tiered system of mental health and trauma support and resources for students and their families.

SB 370 will increase the overall safety and stability of families to ensure greater equity in outcomes for Maryland's students.

In addressing housing within community schools, Community School Coordinators would be able to boost overall student and family support by eliminating the stress factor of housing crisis for families and establishing a safe, supported household. When a family is facing significant financial issues, they often must prioritize those needs over attending school-based meetings, pursuing higher education, maintaining regular physical and mental health care appointments, and connecting with meaningful social supports. This often results in families making the impossible decisions of paying utility bills or paying rent, making a car payment or getting their child's life saving medications. Thus far in FY '24, more than 24% of the financial requests fulfilled by Family Connections Baltimore, have gone to supporting families who are already connected to a community school, with eviction prevention. Most families we partner with express a need for



rental assistance and share how this need impacts their ability to maintain the safety and stability of their children. Allowing community school coordinators to directly offer families this support would decrease the time and therefore stress on a family when facing a housing crisis.

SB 370 will address transportation, safety concerns, and relocations for students and families.

A major area of need that our families have consistently requested support around is housing assistance. The 2023 MEPFA Study found that “about 15% to 25% of families who are evicted likely become homeless.” When students and families are evicted and must relocate, they no longer have the support needed to thrive. In the same MEPFA Study, David Wanger, an attorney with the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, stated that “housing instability through eviction, homelessness or severe conditions of disrepair is the root cause of many family separations. Maryland then pays tens of thousands of dollars on foster parents, attorneys for all parties, social workers, and health care costs – when the state could have paid significantly less just to keep people in stable housing.” Students and families lose essential resources provided by the school such as mental health services, academic support, and after school programming/extended care. All these resources are essential in ensuring the students’ needs are met. With the use of rental assistance of up to 12 months, a family is able to maintain housing stability and maintain support in place or provide the school with enough time to create a transition plan.

As pandemic area eviction prevention funding has not been renewed, we are seeing increased housing insecurity with the families that we work with. The pandemic area funds were crucial to keeping families in their homes and provided a much-needed safety net. The existing services and programs that provide rental support are limited and insufficient to meet the needs of families, especially as the costs of rent and other necessities continue to increase. The best available program currently available to support families with rental assistance is the Emergency Assistance for Families and Children (EAFIC) grant available through the Department of Social Service, though this covers slightly more than a month of rent and is not available for families already receiving housing assistance. Unlike the proposed program outlined in SB 370, many of the existing programs only support families who are experiencing evictions rather than acting as a preventative measure.

Housing stability is integral to the security and success of Maryland’s students in Community Schools. The development of an eviction prevention program is a significant step forward in maintaining social safety nets that support family stability further promoting family engagement and removing barriers to student learning and participation.

Family Connections Baltimore urges a favorable report on SB 370.



UNIVERSITY of MARYLAND
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The Center for
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Sincerely,

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