



HB 428

Community Schools – Rental Assistance for Community School Families Program and Fund - Establishment HEARING OF THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE FEBRUARY 6, 2024 POSITION: FAVORABLE

The Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland (“PBRC”), an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is the statewide thought leader and clearinghouse for pro bono civil legal services in Maryland. As the designated pro bono arm of the MSBA, PBRC provides training, mentorship, and pro bono service opportunities to members of the private bar and offers direct legal services to over 6,200 clients annually. **PBRC supports HB 428 because it represents a common sense way to ensure that tenants and their children will have access to rental assistance funds when they most need it in order to preserve stable housing for their entire families.**

In May 2017, with a grant from the Maryland Judiciary’s Access to Justice Department, **PBRC launched the Tenant Volunteer Lawyer of the Day (“TVLD”) Program in Baltimore City Rent Court to provide day-of-court legal representation to tenants who appear unrepresented for their proceedings.** Since then, this continually-expanding Program has allowed PBRC staff and volunteer attorneys to represent thousands of tenants in both Baltimore City and Baltimore County in multiple types of legal actions that could result in eviction. PBRC staff has also gone on to assist tenants as they struggle to find or maintain stable housing. We are intimately aware of the thin line that often separates housed families from those experiencing homelessness. Often our clients face eviction not because they have repeatedly missed rent payments, but because they have encountered just one or two financial roadblocks – an illness, necessary car repairs, reduced work hours or a temporary lapse in employment – that result in just one or two months of unpaid rent. This temporary lapse in payment can lead to never-ending late fees and court costs and, ultimately, a warrant for eviction. Emergency Rental Assistance is a vital piece of Maryland’s housing strategy and must be accessible in order to stop this cycle and ensure stable housing for these families.

Connecting these vital supports to schools represents a common sense approach to their delivery. **PBRC urges you to support HB 428, which will create a rental assistance funds program for families with children enrolled in Maryland’s community schools. During 2023 over 47% of PBRC’s housing clients reported having school-age children in the home.** We know that, while evictions have dire consequences on everyone involved, it is often the children who suffer the most. Students facing eviction are 6 times more likely to be chronically absent and 4 times more likely to not complete high school,ⁱ and students who have experienced housing insecurity were more likely to have a lower GPA as well as poorer mental health outcomes.ⁱⁱ The National Center on Family Homelessness estimates that the graduation rate of children experiencing homelessness is less than 25%.ⁱⁱⁱ **Families cannot thrive without safe, stable housing. Schools cannot thrive with a student body forced to live in unstable and deplorable conditions.**

Through the Blueprint for Maryland Future, Maryland is investing significant funds to assist families whose children attend community schools. Located throughout Maryland, Community Schools provide support for families by coordinating wraparound services like transportation, healthcare, counseling, and healthy food. **Adding housing stability supports such as rental assistance funds will go a long way toward reducing student mobility, increasing school attendance, and stabilizing communities.**

According to a recent research report by Stout Risius Ross on eviction prevention funds in Maryland, a fully funded program would more than pay for itself. Every dollar spent on eviction prevention saves the State \$2.39. A full \$40 million investment in eviction prevention would yield approximately \$92 million in cost savings or avoidance for the State by reducing homelessness and state-funded safety net costs related to shelter, assisting students experiencing homelessness, health care, foster care, decreased incarceration, and the economic impacts of increased employment and income stability. **On education alone, Stout estimated that a fully funded eviction prevention funds program (about \$40 million) would provide \$23.75 million in benefits to the State through better education outcomes for students and an increase in federal funds.**

PBRC understands that the bill sponsor, Sen. Hettleman, will work with advocates, the Maryland State Department of Education, and the Department of Housing and Community Development to refine the administrative structure of the program and minimize the burden on community school coordinators. We also understand and support revising the eligibility criteria to include students who qualify as homeless under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act while deleting the current priority in the bill.

Maryland cannot be a national leader in ending childhood poverty, righting the racial wrongs of the past and ensuring shelter for all without investing in rental assistance funds. HB 428 offers a common sense approach to this investment. For these reasons, PBRC supports HB 428. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

For the above reasons,

PBRC urges a FAVORABLE report on HB 428.

Please contact Katherine Davis, Director of PBRC's Courtroom Advocacy Project, with any questions.
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ⁱ <https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/study-homeless-and-highly-mobile-students-san-mateo-county/housing-instability-and>

ⁱⁱ Mariah Kornbluh, et al., Exploring Housing Insecurity in Relation to Student Success, J Am Coll Health, Apr. 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Health Care for the Homeless, Homelessness in Maryland, <https://www.hchmd.org/homelessness-maryland> (last visited Dec. 1, 2023).