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The Honorable Marc Korman
Chair, Environment and Transportation Committee
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

House Bill 693
Renter's Rights and Stabilization Act of 2024
Position: FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Korman, Vice Chair Boyce, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 693, a bill that includes several key provisions that would advance housing security to Maryland renters.

Community Legal Services (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 legal advice and representation in more than 12,000 landlord/tenant cases, and our services have benefitted more than 26,000 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.

Prior to the pandemic, eviction filings were a significant problem in Maryland due to the high cost of living and the extremely low cost of filing eviction cases. The eviction crisis was only exacerbated by the pandemic, which disproportionately impacted minority and poverty-stricken communities. As a result, we have seen a tremendous increase in the number of tenants facing eviction.

Luckily, in 2021, Maryland's General Assembly passed Access to Counsel in Evictions (ACE) legislation, which was subsequently funded in 2023. This legislation has allowed organizations like ours to hire more staff which in turn, allowed us to assist more tenants with their eviction cases. In light of the financial devastation caused by the pandemic and the unaffordability of housing, our objective has always been to even the playing field, and to give tenants the same opportunities that are given to landlords. 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. An example of this involved a case in which our office represented a tenant who was a paraplegic who suffered from significant and ongoing health complications. The tenant had also incurred high energy and utility expenses that resulted in her falling behind on her rent. When this tenant reached out to our office, our Community Engagement Coordinator helped her apply for rental assistance, which was approved, and her rent was made current. Our Community Engagement Coordinator also submitted an application for energy assistance on behalf of the client to prevent her utilities from being shut off. As a result, the tenant was enrolled in an ongoing energy assistance program which provided her with a \$75 monthly credit for future energy costs. Approximately two months later, this same tenant reached back out to our office because she received a Breach of Lease court summons in which she disputed all allegations. Our Senior Staff Attorney entered her appearance and after extensive trial prep and negotiations, the case resulted in a dismissal. In addition to funding through Access to Counsel in Evictions (ACE), Maryland Legal Services Corporation has also provided us with funding that allows us to assist tenants with their overlapping legal needs in cases involving foreclosure, bankruptcy, family law, expungements, and domestic violence cases.

However, what remains problematic is the number of tenants who continue to be summoned to court in eviction cases. It is no secret that Maryland has some of the highest eviction filings in the country, while simultaneously having some of the lowest eviction filing fees when compared to other states. The average filing fee nationwide is \$120, while the filing fee in Maryland is just about \$15. This has led to numerous "serial filings" which often involve tenants being summoned to court repeatedly month after month, with landlords often filing for individual months instead of the entire amount that may be owed. This not only results in administrative burdens on the court, but it causes tenants to lose numerous days of work which equates to less pay causing them to get further and further behind.

Our office supports an increase in eviction filing fees, as long as landlords are required to bear the cost of the increase, and these fees are not passed to the tenants. Through our daily representation of tenants, we see how serial filings cause tenants to live in a perpetual state of housing instability. Our goal as tenant advocates is simply to even the playing field, and to reduce homelessness whenever possible. Although Access to Counsel will not solve the housing unaffordability crisis alone, it provides tenants with a meaningful opportunity to have access to legal representation, which often results in tenants being connected with resources so that their landlords can be paid, as well as creating a more efficient and fair process overall.

For the reasons stated above,
CLS urges a FAVORABLE report on House Bill 693.

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