

Tina Heidrick

Harford County Bar Foundation

Bill: HB103 Access to Counsel in Evictions - Task Force Termination & Special Fund

Committee: Appropriations

Position: Favorable

Dear Appropriations Committee:

Continuing the Access to Counsel Program in Eviction is not just important—it's essential. This program has been a lifeline in Harford County, providing tenants with the support and representation they desperately need to navigate the legal system and find solutions for evictions. The trauma of eviction is devastating, with long-term consequences that ripple through families, particularly impacting children. Most of the tenants we assist are families with dependents—young mothers, often in tears, who come to court terrified of losing the only home their children know. As a same-day intake person, I witness this distress firsthand. I hear many stories of juggling basic needs like food, gas, and medical care while struggling to keep up with skyrocketing rents.

The rising cost of living has far outpaced income growth, leaving low-income tenants in an impossible position. Most landlords arrive in court represented by attorneys or agents, while tenants almost never have legal support. This creates a significant imbalance. Furthermore, self-represented landlords are often unaware of tenants' legal rights. By providing education to both parties and promoting accountability, we can foster more constructive and equitable landlord-tenant relationships.

Through this program, we represent tenants in failure-to-pay-rent hearings—cases where they cannot afford legal fees. In many instances, we help secure precious time for families to either find alternative housing or catch up on overdue rent. Helping families to avoid a traumatic event such as eviction. The desperation and despair that tenants feel when they arrive at court is often transformed into confidence and an actionable plan after their hearing.

The funding for this program is critical. As our economy, cost of goods and services including the cost of rent continue to spiral out of control, the need for this program has never been more urgent. Without it, countless families will face the traumatic, life-altering consequences of eviction and homelessness. We must ensure this program remains in place, offering hope, dignity, and a fair chance to those who need it the most.