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TESTIMONY ON HB103 – POSITION: FAVORABLE

Access to Counsel in Evictions – Task Force Termination and Special Fund

TO: Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and members of the Appropriations Committee

FROM: Mark Martin, on behalf of Jews United for Justice

My name is Mark Martin, and I am a longtime resident of District 40 in Baltimore City. This testimony is in support of HB103, on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ). JUFJ organizes more than 1,600 people in Baltimore City to support social, racial, and economic justice.

Ancient Jewish texts are full of laws and traditions that discuss ways to make sure people can remain in their homes. The prophet Micah understood that to deny a person safe housing is not only robbing them in the present, but also robbing their family for generations to come.

The Maryland General Assembly recognized years ago that without lawyers most tenants lose their cases, fueling unduly high eviction rates. That's why, in 2021, Maryland took the bold step to pass the Access to Counsel in Evictions Law (ACE) providing income-qualified tenants statewide with the right of access to counsel in eviction proceedings. The ACE program is a proven success. ACE attorneys closed more than 9,100 cases statewide in FY2024 alone, directly benefiting some 21,000 people including 9,100 children; 88% of these tenants who wanted to stay in their homes were able to do so. The program also promotes housing equity: 72% of ACE clients identify as Black, 72% as female, and 33% report having a household member with a disability. And, crucially, the ACE program is cost-effective. In FY2024, the program provided a \$3 return for every \$1 invested by the state, resulting in \$46 million in fiscal benefits and a reduction in the state's costs (largely owing to a decline in the demand for public services that would otherwise be used by those evicted).¹

The future of all this recent progress is now at risk, since the Special Fund for the ACE program only temporarily receives \$14 million annually from the state's Abandoned Property Fund. This funding is currently set to expire in 2027. HB103 goes a long way toward ensuring the ACE program's sustainability and continued success by making permanent the annual \$14 million distribution to the Fund.

¹ * Report of the Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force, January, 2025, pp. 11, 15-17, https://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/A2C_Docs/2025_ACE_TF_Report.pdf.

This fiscal foundation is critical to moving ahead with what the General Assembly had the foresight to start in 2021. Anything less would be a betrayal of ACE's promise of a more just judicial eviction process, greater housing stability and equity for renters, and a reduction in the personal and societal costs that result from evictions.

On behalf of JUFJ, I respectfully urge a favorable report on HB103.