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Budget and Taxation Committee
3 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Monday, January 13, 2025

SB0154 – Access to Counsel in Evictions – Task Force Termination and Special Fund

Position: **SUPPORT**

Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and Esteemed Members of the Budget and Taxation Committee:

My name is Ronnie L. Taylor. I serve as the Community Advocacy Manager at FreeState Justice, a nonprofit organization that addresses systemic inequities and provides legal services to Maryland's LGBTQ+ community. I am here to testify in strong support of **SB0154**, which aims to solidify funding and support for the Access to Counsel in Evictions Program by making the Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund permanent and terminating the task force.

This legislation addresses the critical issue of housing instability and the disproportionate impact of evictions on vulnerable populations, including low-income households and marginalized communities. According to a report from the Public Justice Center, more than 97% of tenants in eviction cases in Maryland lack legal representation, compared to landlords, who are represented 81% of the time. This disparity creates significant barriers to justice and perpetuates cycles of poverty.

The Access to Counsel in Evictions Program has demonstrated the power of legal representation to level the playing field, reduce eviction judgments, and promote housing stability. This bill safeguards the program's ability to provide essential legal services to those who need them most by ensuring permanent funding through the Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund.

SB0154 achieves its objectives through the following key provisions:

- **Permanent Funding:** The bill ensures that \$14 million from abandoned property funds is annually allocated to the Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund. This stable funding source is

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essential for the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) to sustain the program's operations.

- **Broader Impact:** Data from states like New York, which implemented similar programs, shows that access to counsel reduces evictions by as much as 84%. In Maryland, this could translate into thousands of families avoiding displacement annually, significantly reducing homelessness and associated costs.
- **Equity and Access:** By making the program's funding permanent, the bill reinforces Maryland's commitment to addressing systemic inequities. It ensures that low-income individuals and marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ residents, can access the legal representation they deserve.
- **Task Force Termination:** With the program's foundational elements firmly established, the bill's provision to sunset the Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force streamlines operations and redirects resources to direct services.

As an advocate for housing equity, I have witnessed the devastating effects of eviction on LGBTQ+ individuals, who face discrimination and higher rates of housing insecurity. Access to legal representation provides a shield against wrongful evictions and a pathway to dignity and stability.

I respectfully request that the committee issue a **FAVORABLE** report on **SB0154**. This legislation invests in justice, equity, and the well-being of Maryland residents. By permanently making the Access to Counsel in Evictions Special Fund, Maryland can lead the nation in protecting its most vulnerable communities and affirming that everyone deserves a fair chance at housing security.

Best,

Ronnie L. Taylor

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