

January 15, 2025



TESTIMONY ON SB 154 - POSITION: FAVORABLE
Access to Counsel in Evictions – Task Force Termination and Special Fund
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

To: Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and members of the Budget and Taxation Committee

From: Renters United Maryland

Renters United Maryland, the only statewide coalition of advocates, organizers, and renters fighting for housing justice in Annapolis, urges the Committee's favorable report of Senate Bill 154 to permanently secure funding for the Access to Counsel in Evictions (ACE) Special Fund. As housing justice advocates, we believe Maryland renters facing eviction must have access to legal representation and that the future of that access must be free from doubt. Funding for the right to counsel in evictions is one of our coalition's top priorities in the 2025 General Assembly Legislative Session.

Overview of Senate Bill 154

SB 154 will ensure annual funding for renters' access to representation, contribute to a fairer court system, and reduce the devastating impacts of housing instability and displacement. This bill makes permanent the annual distribution of \$14 million from the Maryland's Abandoned Property Fund to the ACE Special Fund, administered by the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC). This funding supports legal representation for low-income tenants in eviction cases and administrative proceedings related to subsidy termination.

SB 154 promotes equity and fairness

Evictions disproportionately impact Black women, single mothers, and individuals with disabilities—groups already facing systemic inequalities. According to the 2025 Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force Report, 72% of ACE clients identify as Black, and 33% report having a household member with a disability. These numbers highlight the ACE Program's critical role in addressing inequities and supporting vulnerable populations in Maryland.¹ ACE representation levels the legal playing field and ensures that tenants have a fair chance in court.

The ACE Program has demonstrated remarkable success. In FY 2024, ACE attorneys closed over 9,100 cases, benefiting more than 21,000 Marylanders, including 9,100 children.² Approximately 88% of tenants who wished to remain in their homes were able to do so.³ Moreover, independent analysis reveals that ACE provides a \$3 return for every \$1 invested, resulting in \$46.7 million in fiscal benefits to the state in FY 2024 alone. These benefits stem

¹ Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force, *Report of the Access to Counsel in Evictions Task Force* (Jan. 2025), 16-17, available at

https://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/A2C_Docs/2025_ACE_TF_Report.pdf.

² *Id.* at 11, 15.

³ *Id.* at 16.

from reduced shelter costs, decreased public health expenditures, and improved housing stability.⁴

SB 154 furthers the long-term impact of ACE

A baseline of permanent funding is essential to the program's sustainability and continued success. While the ACE program currently receives \$14 million annually from the Abandoned Property Fund, this funding is set to expire in 2027. Without SB 154, Maryland risks undermining the progress made in building toward a fairer judicial process and reducing the societal costs of displacement.

Despite demonstrated successes, the ACE Program faces challenges in implementation, including high eviction filing rates and tenant awareness gaps. While the state waits to see whether increased eviction filing fees made effective in October 2024 have the intended deterrent impact at a systemic level, Maryland courts continued to see over 30,000 eviction filings per month last year, amounting to over 400,000 eviction filings annually. Meanwhile, two-thirds of ACE-represented renters report that they learned about their right to counsel only on their court date. Thus, sustained funding under SB 154 is crucial to continuing to scale up the Program to meet renters' need across the state and will allow for expanded outreach and tenant education that will improve earlier utilization of ACE.

SB 154 is a vital step toward ensuring housing stability and equity for Maryland renters. By securing a baseline of permanent funding for the ACE program, this legislation will protect thousands of families from the traumatic consequences of eviction and strengthen communities across the state.

We urge the Committee to give a **favorable report** to SB 154 and to reaffirm Maryland's commitment to housing justice.

Renters United Maryland Steering Committee:

CASA

Economic Action Maryland

Jews United for Justice

Maryland Legal Aid

NAACP Maryland State Conference

Progressive Maryland

Public Justice Center

⁴ *Id.* at 14.