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SB 154: Access to Counsel in Evictions – Task Force Termination and Special Fund

Hearing before the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee on January 15, 2025

Position: SUPPORT (FAV)

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a nonprofit public interest law firm that stands with tenants to protect and expand their rights to safe, habitable, affordable, and non-discriminatory housing and their rights to fair and equal treatment by Maryland's landlord-tenant laws, courts, and agencies. The PJC actively works towards instigating systemic changes to establish a society founded on justice. Our focus is on utilizing legal avenues to remove barriers that impede economic and racial equity, through our various projects. PJC seeks the **Committee's Favorable report on SB 154** as this allows tenants easier access to safe and stable housing and also promotes racial equity.

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.

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. 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. Approximately 88% of tenants who wished to remain in their homes were able to do so. 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 from reduced shelter costs, decreased public health expenditures, and improved housing stability.

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.

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.

Public Justice Center is a member of the Renters United Maryland coalition and asks that the Committee issue a **FAVORABLE report on SB 154**. If you have any questions, please contact Albert Turner, Esq., turnera@publicjustice.org (410) 625-9409 Ext. 250.