

Dear Reps. McGee and Smith, Sens. Lopes and Anwar, and members of the Housing Committee:

My name is Zoë Ackerman. I am a resident of New Haven, I am testifying in support of Connecticut H.B. 6531 - An Act Concerning the Right to Counsel in Eviction Proceedings and H.B. 6528 - An Act Concerning the Sealing of Eviction Records.

As a renter in Connecticut, I have gotten involved in supporting the fight for housing justice. Housing is medicine, especially in the middle of a pandemic, when one of the top ways people can protect themselves is to stay at home. I've knocked on many tenants' doors in the last few months in an effort to stop evictions, some of whom live in my neighborhood in East Rock, New Haven. The vast majority of tenants I've met have been Black and Latinx tenants, which reflects the fact that Black and Latinx families in Connecticut are twice as likely to have evictions filed against them as white families. While several tenants were already connected with legal counsel, the majority assumed that receiving an eviction notice/summary process meant that they would inevitably be evicted. This power dynamic is a result of the racist and classist underpinnings of our housing system; those with power (landlords, management companies) know how to navigate the legal system, can afford hiring legal counsel, and can intimidate tenants into thinking they have no power. This cycle perpetuates itself: a tenant is evicted; the eviction is on their record; they have a harder time finding housing and even more likely to experience housing instability and homelessness.

Once the eviction moratorium expires, more than 45,000 Connecticut residents expect to face eviction. Most will not have access to a lawyer, and the time to prevent this is now.

Time and time again, I've seen how once tenants are connected with legal counsel, they see they have options to protect themselves and their families in the middle of a pandemic, to tell their side of the case. Guaranteeing a right to counsel is the absolute minimum that the state should offer right now. Connecticut can also be a beacon for the rest of the U.S., to show how this legislation save social servicen costs and, most importantly, improves public health and safety for all.

I strongly support H.B. 6531 and H.B. 6528 and urge you to favorably vote these bills out of the Housing Committee.

Sincerely,

Zoë Ackerman

New Haven, CT