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Written Testimony for the Housing Committee on H.B 6531

My name is Liam Brennan. I am a resident of New Haven and the Executive Director of the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (“CVLC”). I am testifying in support of Connecticut H.B. 6531 - An Act Concerning the Right to Counsel in Eviction Proceedings.

CVLC’s mission is to help veterans who have experienced homelessness and mental illnesses overcome legal barriers to housing, healthcare, and income. CVLC was the nation’s first medical-legal partnership with the federal VA. Since our inception in 2009, we have co-located at VA medical centers in Connecticut, working with VA clinicians to address the “social determinants to health” – that is, the social aspects of one’s life, often legal in nature, that can affect their physical and mental health. Chief among these is housing.

As the pandemic has made clear, keeping people housed is key to keeping them healthy. As an organization dedicated to addressing homelessness amongst veterans, approximately one quarter to a third of the cases we handle are housing cases. This work is key to our mission because

evictions have devastating impacts on tenants. Once evicted, it is exponentially more difficult for a tenant to obtain housing.

However, too many households teeter on the brink of an eviction – only one accident away from being homeless. For example, one of our clients was a single mother of two children. She unexpectedly had to have a heart transplant surgery. While recovering, she fell behind on her rent and had no way to make it up. When she came to CVLC, she was facing the real possibility of ending up homeless with her two children.

With an attorney's help, she was able to negotiate a lease renewal and a payment plan with her landlord. Her attorneys also assisted her in finding rental assistance so that she could make her rent payments in the future.

This story is emblematic of why counsel makes such a difference in tenants' lives. Although 80% of landlords have counsel in eviction proceeding, only about 7% of tenants do. However, when tenants have counsel, they are afforded ways to avoid eviction. At CVLC, we have a 90% positive-outcome rate in our housing cases. For tenants unfamiliar with housing law, a notice to quit can often appear like the final word – a requirement that they must move, leaving them no recourse. An attorney can help ensure they assert their rights and explore their options.

However, that process does not mean that an attorney's presence inevitably leads to a protracted litigation battle. Often, a competent attorney is able to negotiate a mutually beneficial resolution with a landlord – one that

saves the landlord time and money, but more importantly saves our veteran clients from suffering eviction and its collateral consequences. Counsel is often able to negotiate a way out of eviction proceedings for the tenant – buying the client time to move and smoothing the transition to another residence.

Moreover, early intervention by legal counsel can often mitigate some of the costs and problems that make saving a tenancy too expensive. People facing eviction do not just need to cover the back rent, but the cost and legal fees that accrue that in many cases cost as much as the missed rent.

This issue has particular resonance with veterans. Veterans represent approximately 7% of the general population in the United States, but they account for approximately 12% of the homeless population. And evictions are one of the key drivers of homelessness.

In any struggle between a landowner and a tenant, there are going to be huge power imbalances. The right to an attorney for tenants helps level that playing field and leads to more equitable resolutions. This is not only a win for tenants, but for all of society.