

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

My name is Khadija Hussain. 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.

I am 21 years old. In the past years, I have been a tenant on my own for the first time as an independent adult, learning to navigate tenant-landlord relationships in New Haven and New York City. As a tenant, the legal process surrounding housing, from signing a lease to trying to get my security deposit back, has been an incredibly opaque one to me. It is incredibly disempowering and destabilizing to feel that, as a tenant, I have so little agency over my own housing situation.

As a volunteer for Cancel Rent Connecticut, while doing outreach to folks facing eviction, I was not alone in my confusion as a tenant. I spoke to tenants across New Haven who didn't even know they had an eviction case filed against them, or those who knew about the case, but were overwhelmed by the legal jargon thrown at them by the court and the landlord's attorneys. In every single case I worked on, the landlord had an attorney. The tenant did not. The stories of these tenants—my neighbors—have stuck with me. It is horrifying and heartbreaking to stand on the doorstep of a single mother's home, and explain to her that she may have an eviction executed against her, in the middle of winter, while her children wait upstairs. In all of many of these cases, we have been able to get tenants connected with lawyers. But there are too many tenants, and too many evictions filed, for us volunteers to knock on every single door. This is work I am passionate about, and work I will continue to do. But it has still been exhausting and often demoralizing to try to act as a holistic support network for tenants facing eviction. Without a right to counsel, it's almost impossible to provide my fellow tenants with the support that they truly need.

I have lived in New York City in the past year for college, where I rent an apartment and also intern for the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition—the coalition of organizations that passed the first ever right to counsel law in the country, back in 2017. As a tenant, I feel supported in New York City far more than I ever have in Connecticut. Here, because of the right to counsel, tenants are able to organize and advocate for themselves, without the constant fear of eviction bearing down on them. Tenants are able to better support both themselves and one another, when they are not constantly on the brink of crisis. Further, the right to counsel here means that tenants and lawyers are in close contact; as a tenant, I've been able to better understand the laws that govern my housing and rental contracts. And it's not just my opinion—New York has seen a [77% reduction in evictions](#), with [86% of tenants](#) facing eviction staying in their homes. I want this for Connecticut, for the communities and neighbors that I grew up with. Passing H.B. 6531 is the first step to getting here.

I am a tenant now, and will be for the next decades, if not rest, of my life. I want the right to counsel for myself, for my neighbors and community, and for Connecticut. Once the eviction moratorium expires, more than 45,000 Connecticut residents—many my friends, neighbors, and community members, expect to face eviction. Most will not have access to a lawyer. Further, the vast majority of these residents are Black and Latinx; these families are twice as likely to have evictions filed against them as white families in Connecticut.

Now is the time for Connecticut to lead the country—to become the first state to adopt a statewide right to counsel in eviction cases. I strongly support H.B. 6531 and H.B. 6528 and urge you to favorably vote these bills out of the Housing Committee.

Sincerely,

Khadija Hussain
New Haven