

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

My name is Luke Melonakos-Harrison. 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.

For 4 years I worked as a homeless outreach worker. I assisted individuals and families who had lost everything as they attempted to rebuild their lives and emerge from the extreme poverty they were facing. It was demanding, fulfilling, and often devastating work. Through it I learned over and over how difficult it is to navigate many of our public systems, especially for someone who is in the middle of a crisis — and every threat of eviction is a crisis. Our legal systems, in particular, are complex, intimidating, unaccommodating, and filled with specialist jargon. Guaranteed access to a lawyer is a critical need for anyone threatened with losing the roof over their head.

I also speak from my own experience as a tenant. A year ago, a former landlord failed to return my security deposit, refusing to respond to my calls and never giving a reason for it. They had stolen \$1600 from me; money I really needed. It made me feel so powerless. If I stole that amount of money from someone in another way, I would go to prison, and yet my landlord was able to do so with no penalty. I eventually filed a small claim and will be facing them in court in April. The experience highlighted for me the huge imbalance of power that exists between landlords and tenants, and now more than ever. **Rents have risen higher than wages every year for at least two decades** ([see here](#)), and Connecticut ranks 8th for least-affordable housing. 23 million households in this country pay more than 50% of their income in rent. Every day millions of parents have to choose between rent money and their kids' clothes, the wifi, traveling to their family member's funeral, being able to stay home from work when they're sick, etc. With so many people living on such thin financial margins, it means that tenants are more vulnerable than ever to power abuses by landlords. An eviction and an experience of homelessness pushes families further into poverty, traumatizes children, and may take years or generations to come back from.

Does this legislature really believe that all 40,000 of the households expected to face eviction in the next several months — a majority of them families with children — are just “lazy” “low-lives” taking advantage of their landlords and refusing to pay rents they actually can afford? What about the 70,000 additional households who are currently behind on rent? Not to mention the 3,000 people, today, who have nowhere to sleep tonight? If you believe that, then who are you really representing here?

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

Sincerely,

Luke Melonakos-Harrison
New Haven, CT