

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

My name is Alice Sara Prael and I'm an organizer with Central Connecticut Democratic Socialists of America. 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.

This bill is crucial to protecting Connecticut residents through both this pandemic and the eviction crisis. Eviction proceedings are unbalanced and set tenants up to fail. 80% of landlords have an attorney during eviction cases compared to only 7% of tenants. The process moves quickly and the impact of evictions is not felt evenly. Black and Latinx renters are twice as likely to have an eviction filed against them and According to the latest data<sup>1</sup>, 42% of Latinx and 51% of Black families have little or no confidence in their ability to pay March rent compared to 14% of white families. The eviction crisis is a racial justice issue.

Evictions are expensive - they disrupt people's lives, their jobs, their education and their health. They move quickly and tenants without an attorney struggle to navigate such a technical process in order to defend themselves. Evictions also keep tenants from securing housing in the future because landlords often automatically deny applicants with a prior eviction record, regardless of the eviction filing outcome or context.

But the impact of evictions is not only felt by the tenant - evictions are costly for the state as well. Evictions add pressure to the shelter systems, foster care, emergency services and homeless prevention - all of which cost the state. Right to Counsel would significantly lessen these costs - each dollar spent on right to counsel saves the state between 2 and 12 dollars. Providing legal representation for all tenants is a very effective method to reduce evictions. When New York City passed Right to Counsel, evictions dropped by 77%<sup>2</sup> and Cleveland saw a 93% reduction in disruptive displacement<sup>3</sup>. NYC judges testified that Right to Counsel makes housing court proceedings more efficient and fair - reducing eviction filings and thereby reducing pressure on the courts.

It's important that this bill include a program advisory committee that includes low-income tenants so that those who are impacted will have a leading voice in how the program is implemented. It's also critical that representation is provided by legal non-profits that are experienced in eviction defense. One Chicago study showed that legal aid lawyers were twice as effective as private attorneys in keeping tenants from eviction orders<sup>4</sup>. Legal services programs already have the expertise and infrastructure in place to effectively defend tenants - they are the most time and cost effective means to providing counsel for eviction defense.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2021/demo/hhp/hhp24.html>

<sup>2</sup> [A Right to Counsel Is a Right to a Fighting Chance - Center for American Progress](#)

<sup>3</sup> [93% of Cleveland evictions prevented by Right to Counsel program | wkyc.com](#)

<sup>4</sup> Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing

<https://eviction.lcbh.org/sites/default/files/reports/chicago-evictions-3-attorney-representation.pdf>

Attorneys are also most effective when they can help the tenant early in the process, so it's important that tenants are allowed to apply for a lawyer directly with legal non-profits without going to court. Tenants should be able to apply for legal aid as soon as they receive a Notice to Quit so that the attorney can start connecting the tenant to resources like rental assistance programs, negotiating with the landlord, and potentially avoiding court altogether.

I want to thank the Housing Committee for your work on H.B. 6531 and H.B. 6528. These are critically important bills that will materially improve the lives of tenants in Connecticut. We must protect the residents of our state, especially during this pandemic, from the violent disruption caused by evictions.

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

Sincerely,  
Alice Sara Prael  
Central Connecticut Democratic Socialists of America