

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

My name is Jason Ruiz. I am a resident of Stratford and a volunteer organizer with Bridgeport Mutual Aid, a community organization which feeds over a thousand residents of Bridgeport who are unemployed, quarantined or otherwise unable to access groceries, diapers and other basic needs. 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.**

Through my volunteer work with Bridgeport Mutual Aid, I have seen first hand how COVID has impacted the pre-existing housing and eviction crises. In my hundreds of deliveries since March 2020, I have seen numerous families in our network forced to move out of their housing despite being unemployed and requiring bi-weekly food aid. Most are Spanish-speaking immigrants who are not eligible for federal stimulus checks and other COVID relief. In most cases, they are forced to move in with family, who are themselves also struggling with employment and access to food.

It should not come as a shock to the members of this committee that people who struggle to find employment during a pandemic and are unable to purchase adequate and nutritious food are also unable to pay for legal representation in court, which has a provable impact on the likelihood of an eviction order being issued against them. If we cannot guarantee people a right to a job, or pandemic checks, or other forms of material relief, we must guarantee their equal and equitable representation in the court of law and address the growing disparity in representation and ruling between landlords and tenants.

Now more than ever, it is vital that we protect tenants' health and public health at large by keeping as many people in their homes as possible. This is not only beneficial in terms of fighting COVID - it also must be stated that an empty apartment is not producing rent, which does not produce taxes. If we want the economy to recover from its current state, it is vital that people be able to maintain stable housing, so that returning to work (and thus returning to paying rent) can happen as smoothly as possible.

I implore the chairs and members of this committee to ignore the cruel greed of landlords who are relying on the suffering of others to pad their paychecks. No one has the right to exploit others' survival needs for profit during a once-in-a-century pandemic. We all have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and none of those are guaranteed without equal representation in the courts.

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

Sincerely,
Jason Ruiz
Stratford, CT