

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

My name is Linda Thorpe, of Middlebury, and 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 a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, and worked at a community mental health center in Hartford's North End from 2012 to 2014.

While working in the North End community, I became very aware of the eviction crisis in Hartford, and the very unfair rental practices imposed by some landlords, especially landlords who lived out of state, owned numerous buildings, and did little to maintain properties or to ensure healthy and safe living conditions for their tenants. This included evictions in which attorneys represented these landlords in eviction proceedings, and tenants, in the absence of legal counsel, would understandably give up, or try to represent themselves in court. I two years I never witnessed, nor heard about, a success by a tenant.

Following is one of many experiences that represents the critical importance of H.B. 6531 Right to Counsel for Evictions and H.B. 6528 - An Act Concerning the Sealing of Eviction Records.

In 2013 I was working as a counselor with a young woman of color who was in her mid-20s, with a young, school-aged child for whom she was the primary caregiver. She had been raised in Hartford, in foster-care and had suffered physical and emotional abuse during her childhood within that system. In spite of that difficult beginning, she presented to me as motivated, intelligent and determined. She struggled with depression and anxiety, and my role was to help her learn to manage these symptoms by creating insight, teaching coping skills, and learning to make choices which would lead to well-being. As with most of my clients in Hartford, those lofty mental health goals were displaced by efforts to help with clients' more foundational needs: food, clothing, safety, stable housing, assistance with accessing resources for recovery. Only when those basic needs were addressed could the loftier goals of mental health care be considered.

This client was working at a fast food restaurant to support herself and her son. She was promised at least 30 hours/week. The restaurant quickly gave her fewer hours, and she began to fall short on her rent. Her landlord imposed additional fines for late rent, creating a rent debt that far exceeded her ability to pay.

We worked together to access as many resources as were available, and she was already on a Section 8 Housing Voucher wait list. She took photos of the black mold in her apartment, which was making both herself and her son ill, and contacted DPH, who came out to look at it. They did not follow up, until she reached out to them several times. They finally notified the landlord, and eventually a one-foot square piece of wallboard was cut out of the ceiling in the bathroom, and replaced with a new piece of wallboard (screwed into the ceiling). The leak was not repaired. She knew the mold would recur, but she had done everything she could.

We were able to get some rent relief for her through a local church, however, this was a stop-gap measure. The landlord added steep fees to her rent when she was late with her payments, creating additional rent debt. The amount very quickly became insurmountable, and eviction proceedings began.

Meanwhile the client continued to work her fast food job, balancing the needs of her son, meeting with his teachers because of some learning struggles at school, and also trying to prepare for a court proceeding. She wrote copious notes of everything she was doing to try to meet her rent payments, ask for cooperation from the landlord, etc. The client's landlord owned numerous buildings in Hartford, and did not respond to inquiries. There was a local "manager" who was not helpful and mostly inaccessible. The client tried every avenue to advocate for herself, with my help and support.

She tried to access legal counsel through Legal Aid, but they were unable to help.

When unable to access legal counsel, the client represented herself in court, to present a case against the landlord, for both his lack of adequate response to the black mold issue in her apartment, and to fight the additional fees added to her rent debt.

The client reported that the judge had said he was impressed with her presentation to the court, however, there was no "fairy tale ending" for this client. She reported that the landlord's attorney presented a case which left her feeling disempowered and hopeless. She lost her housing, and had to move into a crowded living situation with her son, who now had to attend a different school, interrupting his education. I remember feeling discouraged, disheartened, and angry for this client and the suffering she was experiencing. I remember reflecting on the messages that I grew up with---if you are honest, work hard, do your very best, you will be okay, even successful. Those messages did not (and do not) ring true in the North End of Hartford for a woman of color. What I do remember is the ongoing struggle and suffering this client, and her son by extension, endured, in spite of attempting to access support.

In 2021, the needs of 2013, which felt desperate, pale in comparison to the present crisis.

Evictions create further instability within families already stressed and strained. Evictions create additional health disparities, educational disparities and occupational disparities. So many families rely on public transportation (the bus) and must move to housing with reasonable access to the bus line, further limiting options. Evictions create additional mental health burdens such as depression, increased anxiety, exacerbation of substance use disorders, and a sense of hopelessness and chaos. Barriers feel insurmountable. Right to Counsel could change much of this. Creating a sense of fairness, of having equal representation at court, can provide some much needed hope, in addition to the statistics we know to be true about the profound positive impact that Right to Counsel creates.

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

Sincerely,

Linda R Thorpe

Middlebury

