



**Testimony of Sarah White
In Support of H.B. 6531 – An Act Concerning the Right to Counsel
in Eviction Proceedings, with Amendments**

Sens. Lopes and Anwar, Reps. McGee and Smith, and other members of the Committee: thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify. My name is Sarah White, and I am an attorney at the Connecticut Fair Housing Center, a civil rights organization dedicated to ensuring all of Connecticut's residents have access to the housing of their choice. I'm testifying in support of H.B. 6531, AAC the Right to Counsel in Eviction Proceedings, **with amendments.**

H.B. 6531 would guarantee tenants legal representation if they are facing eviction and unable to afford a lawyer. This is an eviction prevention measure that would reduce evictions, prevent tenant displacement, and save the state money.

Even before the pandemic, Connecticut had some of the [highest eviction rates](#) in the country, with four cities ranking in the top 100 evicting cities. Evictions disproportionately impact Black and Latinx tenants, who are twice as likely to have evictions started against them as white tenants. Evictions have ripple effects and lead to homelessness, job loss, disrupt children's education, negatively impact physical and mental health, and build a barrier to future housing stability. Tenants struggle to navigate the eviction process on their own, yet only 7% of tenants have legal representation in evictions, compared to 80% of landlords.

For every \$1 invested in right to counsel for tenants, the state can expect to save 2X to 12X more in downstream costs. [Philadelphia](#) and [Baltimore](#), which are among the seven cities that have adopted right to counsel, calculated savings of \$12.74 and \$6.24 (respectively) for every \$1 invested in right to counsel. This amounts to an annual savings of \$45.2 million for Philadelphia and \$35.6 million for Baltimore. [Massachusetts](#)—one of at least seven other states currently considering a statewide right to counsel—studied the estimated impact and calculated savings of \$2.40 just in the direct costs of homelessness for every \$1 invested in providing tenants legal representation. This is a total savings of \$63 million for a program that would cost

around \$26 million, and it does not even include likely savings from educational, transportation, court, and other costs. On average, each eviction results in thousands in public costs, including for shelters and homeless services, emergency services, healthcare, educational expenses and transportation, and child welfare. Connecticut’s looming eviction crisis has been [estimated to cost](#) between \$628 million and \$1.2 billion, with an average estimated cost per household of nearly \$9,500. Providing legal representation to tenants is just a fraction of this upstream cost.

A right to counsel reduces the number of evictions overall and the disruptive moves and displacements that are the most harmful to families and costly to the state. In New York City—the first jurisdiction to pass right to counsel—[86% of tenants](#) facing evictions who receive representation stayed in their homes. Cleveland, which just implemented a right to counsel, found that [93% of evictions](#) were prevented in just the first 6 months. San Francisco experienced a [10% reduction](#) in eviction filings in the first year, before the program was even fully implemented, with 67% of represented tenants staying in their homes.

Right to counsel for tenants is popular with voters. A February 2021 national poll found that [68% of voters support a right to counsel](#) in eviction proceedings similar to the right that exists for criminal cases.

Connecticut can reduce evictions and their harmful ripple effects—and save money overall—by passing H.B. 6531 and adopting a right to counsel program for tenants. H.B. 6531 would guarantee tenants no-cost, full legal representation in the eviction process if they are unable to afford it. Legal representation would be provided by legal non-profits that already specialize in eviction defense and in providing holistic representation to low-income tenants, the model for providing legal representation that has been used by every jurisdiction that has a right to counsel program and that builds upon the expertise of the organizations already doing this work. Tenants would get a brochure about their right to a lawyer when sued, and legal representation would be provided as soon as possible, no later than their first court date. The court would delay a hearing if the tenant needed more time to obtain counsel.

H.B. 6531 can be improved to better serve tenants and prevent evictions:

- The program would be most efficiently run through a non-profit organization, such as the Connecticut Bar Foundation, or an office in a state agency, which would contract with

legal non-profits to provide representation and would already be equipped to provide program oversight. This is the model that has been used by all the jurisdictions that have created a right to counsel program and most of the states now considering it.

- The program should include an advisory committee that includes low-income tenants and tenant advocates to ensure that the program is responsive to the needs on the ground.
- Legal representation by legal non-profits experienced in eviction defense should be guaranteed (which the bill prioritizes, but not does not guarantee).
- Tenants should be allowed to apply for a lawyer directly with legal non-profits providing services, without having to go to court, and as soon as they get a Notice to Quit.

Requesting legal representation should be simple. The program will have the most impact in reducing evictions if tenants can access it as soon as possible. The goal should be to prevent evictions from even starting. At least three jurisdictions let tenants access legal help as soon as they get a Notice to Quit (Boulder, Philadelphia, San Francisco), and most allow tenants to apply directly with a legal non-profit for legal representation.

- Administrative hearings to terminate Section 8 or RAP vouchers or public housing tenancies should also be covered. These happen outside the court process to terminate housing assistance and can be high stakes—losing a Section 8 voucher can mean homelessness for a family, with no prospect for further assistance. Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City all include representation for administrative proceedings like these.

H.B. 6531 would have an enormous impact in addressing our looming eviction crisis and the social, economic, and public health repercussions of evictions. We urge its passage.