



Massachusetts Catholic Conference
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May 11, 2023

Hon. James Eldridge, Senate Chair
Hon. Michael Day, House Chair
Joint Committee on Judiciary
State House
24 Beacon St, Room 136
Boston, MA 02133

Re: House Bill 1731

Dear Senator Eldridge and Representative Day,

The Massachusetts Catholic Conference (MCC) is the public policy office of the Catholic Church in Massachusetts representing the Archdiocese of Boston along with the Dioceses of Fall River, Springfield, and Worcester. Please accept this letter in support of House Bill 1731 entitled *“An Act promoting access to counsel and housing stability in Massachusetts”*.

This legislation, if passed, would establish a “Right to Counsel Program” to provide legal representation for indigent individuals facing eviction proceedings in Massachusetts.

Today, a vast majority of landlord/owners are represented by counsel in eviction proceedings. Most tenants facing this highly stressful, multi-level process do not have the means to hire counsel to protect their interest and the interests of those who depend on them. This program will level the playing field in court. It is an approach that would prevent sudden displacement of families by providing the stability needed to make the most vulnerable residents of our state more secure in their homes knowing they have a trained professional to assist them.

For too long the poorest among us have been marginalized across the United States including many communities in Massachusetts. This was particularly noteworthy during the worst months of the pandemic as we witnessed how disproportionately the virus was affecting the poorer communities as they struggled to survive and pay rent – many living in very tight quarters.

We must all realize that many of these same people stepped up and put their health and their family's health at risk to provide critical services to our communities – risking their own lives during the pandemic. We relied on their hard work during the darkest months of the pandemic and continue to rely on them today. They are grocery store workers, day care providers, janitors, restaurant employees just to name a few. They were and continue to be on the front lines. The poor, including many undocumented immigrants, provide these essential services and yet are often subject to eviction as wages remain low and the cost for rental units continue to rise at an unprecedented rate.

In 2021, it is estimated that 73% of individuals behind on their rent were people of color. Furthermore, statistics also indicate that poor women, particularly in the minority community, are the hardest hit. They are facing a disproportionate number of evictions compared to their male counterparts. Less than two years ago, it has been reported that approximately 65,000 women in Massachusetts were behind on their rent. Many of the women are single parents with young children. Many of these same women have been subject to domestic violence, maternal depression and the stress of raising a family without knowing if they will be homeless. Month after month they do their best to survive while the fear being evicted from their home never subsides.

The Catholic Church teaches that “having adequate shelter is a basic human right; a right that the Church affirms as a key part of respecting and recognizing the individual. Ensuring everyone is able to access a safe, stable and adequate home is one part of working for the common good.”

The Boston Bar Association estimated that the “Access to Counsel Program” would cost the Commonwealth approximately twenty-six million dollars per year. This investment in our community is worth the cost because it is an investment in our most vulnerable members of society. It has been embraced by the State of Connecticut and many large cities across the United States and will be a very effective program in Massachusetts.

On behalf of the Roman Catholic Bishops of Massachusetts, the MCC strongly urges the Joint Committee on Judiciary to act favorably on House Bill 1731.

Very truly yours,

James F. Driscoll
Executive Director