PARTNERSHIP FOR STRONG COMMUNITIES

Partnership for Strong Communities promotes equitable change in Connecticut housing policy by coordinating advocacy, advancing research, and uniting diverse partners

APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2025

IN SUPPORT OF ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR THE RIGHT TO COUNSEL PROGRAM WHICH PROVIDES NO-COST LEGAL REPRESENTATION TO INCOME ELIGIBLE TENANTS AND OCCUPANTS AT RISK OF EVICTION OR SUBSIDY TERMINATION

To Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Senator Kushner, Representative Exum, Representative, Paris, Senator Somers and Representative Nuccio and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Amy Peltier, and I am the Coalition and Advocacy Director at the Partnership for Strong Communities. The Partnership is a statewide nonprofit research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring everyone in Connecticut has a safe, stable home that is affordable to them in an equitable community of their choice.

We respectfully request that the Committee support $1,750,000 for FY 26 and $5,000,000 for FY 27 for a total of $6,750,000 to continue the essential services provided by the CT Right to Counsel program. CT-RTC provides no-cost legal representation to income eligible tenants and occupants at risk of eviction or subsidy termination. The Partnership seeks these additional funds to support vulnerable residents at risk of losing their homes and at risk of becoming homeless.

Passed in May 2021 by the Connecticut General Assembly and signed by Governor Ned Lamont in June 2021, Public Act 21-34 created an eviction right to counsel program for eligible tenants in Connecticut (CT-RTC). In September 2021, The CT Bar Foundation (CBF) was selected by the Judicial Branch through a competitive RFP process to administer the new program. Five legal service agencies provide services and represent eligible tenants through the CT-RTC program, including: Connecticut Legal Services, Connecticut Veterans Legal Center, Greater Hartford Legal Aid, New Haven Legal Assistance Association, Inc., and Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut – collectively "the Providers."

Since services began on January 31, 2022, the Providers have prevented evictions or disrupted displacements for 6,050 clients; this program works. A 2022 study found that the program achieved 73% of clients' stated case goals and saved them costly legal fees. These are often already marginalized clients for whom an eviction would be devastating, including victims of domestic violence, people with poor health or disabilities, and people struggling with low incomes who are disproportionately more likely to face eviction. Stabilizing these tenants prevents unnecessary hardship and saves the state money. In fact, it has been reported through independent evaluation that Connecticut realized economic benefits of at least $36.6 million between January 31, 2022, and November 30, 2024, because of CT-RTC. The cost savings are attributable to savings in areas that support family economic stability.
Evictions are a contributing cause of homelessness in CT. According to the Eviction Lab, in Hartford alone, eviction filings in December 2024 were up 25% more than December 2019,

pre-pandemic. Recently, the number of tenants represented in evictions across the state surpassed pre-CT-RTC numbers by almost three times. Black, indigenous, people of color are experiencing eviction, homelessness, and housing instability at disproportionate rates. If fully implemented, an eviction record makes it hard for families to be stable and productive for years after the eviction and makes it difficult for people to work, for children to go to school, and leads to poor health outcomes. When a tenant has legal counsel in an eviction case, the CT Fair Housing Center has found the likelihood of a case being withdrawn based on an agreed upon remedy has more than doubled. Continuing the work of CT-RTC supports housing stability, saves the state money, and moves us toward a more just and equitable housing system.

Although the CT-RTC was initially funded with ARPA dollars, this crisis existed before the pandemic, and it should not be classified as one-time funding for a pandemic related issue. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the eviction crisis in Connecticut, however, in December 2016, years before we faced the challenges of a global health pandemic, the Judiciary Committee of the CT General Assembly issued the "Report of the Task Force to Improve Access to Legal Counsel in Civil Matters." The Committee provided a series of legislative recommendations that would "enable our State and its residents to improve our fiscal and social well-being…" They identified 3 crucial areas where ***"the fiscal and social cost of likely injustice significantly outweighs the fiscal cost of civil counsel."*** The areas identified were Restraining Order Matters, Child Custody and detained removal proceedings, and ***defense of residential evictions***. The injustice of facing an eviction without counsel to inform an individual of their legal rights and help navigate the judicial process has only increased. Personally, as an attorney who is part of the CT Bar, I think this is an issue of access to equal justice. Continuing this critically important program is directly in line with the mission of the CT Bar Association to advance principles of law and justice.

The General Assembly had the foresight in 2021 to be a national leader and the second state in the country to pass legislation to support a statewide Right to Counsel Eviction Defense program. Since that time, 24 jurisdictions have followed CT's leadership by establishing RTC programs. The Partnership urges the committee to continue being a national leader and strategically allocate $1,750,000 in FY 26 and $5,000,000 in FY 27 for a total of $6,750,000 to CT-RTC and ensure this program will continue to provide critical services to the low-income residents of CT.

Thank you and please feel free to contact me with any questions.
Respectfully submitted,

Amy Peltier