Testimony Re: Senate Bill 528 Regarding Residential Landlord and Tenant Act – Sealing and Unsealing of Eviction Records

Senate Judiciary Committee
March 11, 2021
Stephanie Geller, Deputy Director

Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for Senate Bill 528. This bill would ensure that eviction records are not available to the public until the court has reached a judgement and concluded that the tenant has violated the terms of a rental agreement.

In Rhode Island, evictions are currently public record, and eviction complaints remain on a tenant's court record even in cases where a complaint is dismissed or otherwise determined in their favor. Increasingly landlords are using tenant screening companies, Internet searches, and other methods to access tenant eviction records. Many landlords refuse to rent to tenants with even one eviction filing on their record, regardless of the outcome of the case or other details that may offer additional context on a prospective tenant's past rental circumstances.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic many Rhode Islanders struggled to pay for their housing and others faced systemic barriers that prevented them from finding housing. Having an eviction record creates a huge barrier for tenants looking for housing, and multiple studies show that African Americans, women, and people with disabilities have the highest rates of evictions and therefore are most likely to be harmed by current practices.

Rhode Islanders already face many challenges to finding safe, healthy, and affordable homes. We urge you to pass this legislation and remove one of these barriers.

Thank you, Senators Mack, Acosta, Mendes, Anderson, Calkin, Bell, Kallman, DiMario, Quezada, and Cano for sponsoring this important legislation, and thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.