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Testimony Re: House Bill 7893 Re: Residential Landlord and Tenant Act – Requirement to Participate in Rental Relief

House Judiciary Committee

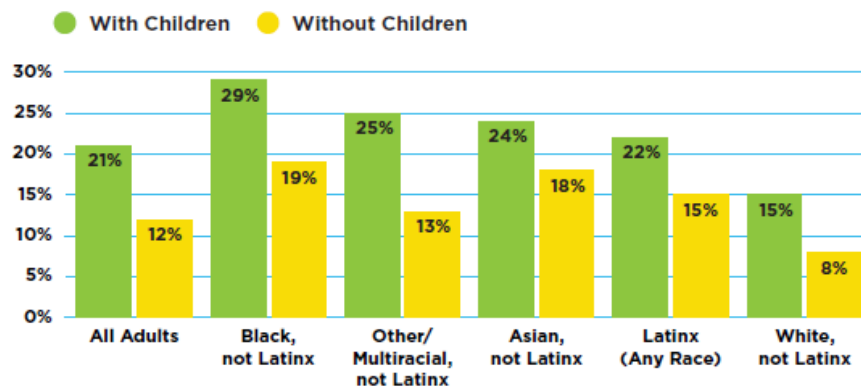
March 17, 2022

Stephanie Geller, Deputy Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to thank Representative Felix for sponsoring this bill, thank Representatives Morales, Barros, Kislak, Alzate, Giraldo, Diaz, Cassar, Kazarian, and Ruggiero for cosponsoring, and voice its strong support for House Bill 7893. This bill would require landlords to complete the landlord portion of an application for federal emergency rental assistance before starting an action for eviction against a residential tenant for nonpayment of rent. A landlord would be allowed to proceed with the eviction if the application for rental assistance is denied or if 30 days have passed since a landlord's documentation has been submitted, whichever comes first.

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. **This situation became even more dire due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic hardships faced by families.** At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, one in five renters in the U.S. reported that they could not keep up with their rent. In Rhode Island, 28% of renters surveyed from September 15 to October 22, 2021 reported that they could not keep up with their rent. Families, particularly families of color, faced the greatest hardships.

ADULT RENTERS SAYING THEIR HOUSEHOLD IS NOT CAUGHT UP ON RENT, U.S. HOUSEHOLDS



When families cannot afford their rent, they are at risk of being evicted due to nonpayment. 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.

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.

Tenants who have lost employment or income due to COVID-19 and been unable to meet their rent can get help paying their rental arrearages through our state's rental relief program. Requiring that landlords cooperate with this process by completing their section of the rental assistance application before taking an eviction action makes common sense. It will ensure that more families can access rental assistance and that fewer families face eviction. Fewer evictions when paired with rental assistance will help both landlords and tenants.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.