



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

Testimony Re: Senate Bill 2375 Re: Residential Landlord and Tenant Act – Sealing of Residential Eviction Proceedings

Senate Judiciary Committee

May 10, 2022

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 strong support for Senate Bill 2375. This act would provide for the sealing and unsealing of court files in residential eviction proceedings and provide that evictions for nonpayment of rent shall remain sealed permanently if the tenant's rent arrearage is paid through the rental relief program.

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**.

Tenants who lost employment or income due to COVID-19 and have been unable to meet their rent can get help paying their rental arrearages through our state's rental relief program and when they receive this help should not be penalized with a permanent mark on their record that will be a barrier to finding housing in the future.

We want to thank Senator Mack for sponsoring this important legislation and Senators Anderson, Mendes, Calkin, Valverde, Kallman, Acosta, Seveney, Murray, and Quezada for cosponsoring.

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 and to carefully consider an emerging compromise which would permit cases to be sealed at the conclusion of the case, and based upon the outcome of the case. Our recent *Policy Brief on Housing Instability and Homelessness Among Rhode Island Children* includes recommendations for addressing housing instability and homelessness among Rhode Island families, and sealing eviction records is among these recommendations.

Thank you for your efforts to address the housing crisis in Rhode Island and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.