

**Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Housing In support of S.864 An Act Promoting Access to Counsel and Housing Stability in Massachusetts.**

**By Lori Stewart, Neighborhood Stability Coordinator/Office of Mayor Dominick Pangallo City of Salem September 27, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chair Edwards, Chair Arciero and Members of the Committee. My name is Lori Stewart. I am the Neighborhood Stability Coordinator for the City of Salem, a city with a population of 44,480. Forty eight percent of our residents are renters of low to moderate income. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. On behalf of the City of Salem and Mayor Dominick Pangallo I urge you to favorably pass S.864, An Act Promoting Access to Counsel and Housing Stability in Massachusetts.

In July Salem passed a resolution in support of both Access to Counsel and Eviction sealing because eviction case filings between January- August 2023 in Housing Court statewide are surpassing the number of pre-pandemic eviction filings. Additionally, our State Representative Manny Cruz and State Senator Joan Lovely are both co-sponsors of this bill and last year as Mayor of Salem before she became lieutenant governor Kim Driscoll supported Access to Counsel.

In Salem we contract with a housing attorney through the Essex County Bar Association. Through this program we offer drop-in hours one day a week for 3 hours. This service is more than most municipalities can offer but even with this housing stability service I see many residents in various stages of eviction falling through the cracks, and struggling with the terror and stress that losing your home brings. Many people I see who are not evicted are feeling forced into agreements that they cannot sustain because they do not have full representation. I recently worked with Marisol, a 19-year-old single mother still attending high school who was facing eviction and the loss of her Section 8 voucher. Marisol's schedule of school, work and caring for a child prevented her from accessing Salem's housing stability service despite her best efforts. From the beginning when she first came to me everything having to do with her housing situation was over her head. I did my best to guide her, but I am not an attorney, and she eventually lost her home and her voucher. If she had had full legal representation this could have been avoided. Losing her home and voucher was devastating. Last I heard from Marisol she was doubled up with a distant relative hoping for something better. The stakes are so high, especially now with the astronomical numbers of folks on housing wait lists for deeply subsidized apartments and vouchers. Because Marisol could not access counsel, she lost her Section 8 voucher and may never get into affordable housing again.

Salem passed a resolution because the city wants to promote housing stability and anti-displacement, but we have reached a point where we need the state to act, we need this bill.