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To Whom it May Concern:

Support for H1731, An Act Promoting Access to Counsel and Housing Stability in MA

Please accept this submission of written testimony ahead of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary's scheduled hearing on Tuesday, May 9th.

My name is Vinny Wisniewski and I work for HomeStart, Inc. where for close to 15 years I have been a part of our Homelessness Prevention Program. We are a team of non-attorney advocates who assist low income households in Boston facing eviction for non-payment of rent in housing court to preserve and stabilize their tenancies. I am writing to express HomeStart's strong support for H.1731, An act promoting access to counsel and housing stability in Massachusetts. Being on the front lines of eviction prevention and seeing first hand the devastation that being evicted can cause, we feel it is impossible to overstate the value of having legal representation. We know that represented tenants achieve more favorable resolutions in their eviction cases. At a time when we are facing an affordable housing crisis, every effort should be made to help ensure housing stability for as many people as possible.

Witnessing the power imbalance in courts every week between pro se tenants and represented landlords can be jarring. Few aspects of our lives are as important to our overall health and well-being as having a safe, stable place to call home. Yet, when the most vulnerable households among us are faced with the loss of that stability, they are expected to navigate a difficult legal process on their own. Pro se tenants are often scared, confused, intimidated and are not aware of their rights or how to assert them. They are at the disadvantage of negotiating with experienced housing attorneys representing their landlords or, even more intimidating, trying to argue their case before a judge.

The legal services that exist at this time are invaluable but inadequate compared to the need. Likewise, programs such as ours at HomeStart are not a true substitute for the value of having full legal representation. It is time to change this.

In trying to identify one particular client story that would illustrate the impact of having legal representation, it was difficult to pick just one. We have seen numerous cases where tenants were unknowingly overcharged for rent, where there were procedural defects in the eviction action, where the need for reasonable accommodations were identified, where tenants were helped in asserting protections under the Violence Against Women Act, and many other examples. If not for being lucky enough to receive the aid of legal services, these issues would have been left unaddressed and these households would have been evicted and displaced.

But whether someone is evicted or not should not be left to luck. The stakes are too high. This legislation would help bring balance to an unbalanced system and ensure that all eligible

tenants who are facing eviction are able to fully assert their rights and navigate a legal system that is complex and fast moving. This is a chance to make this part of the justice system a little more just. We urge the committee to favorably report out this important legislation. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Vinny Wisniewski

Homelessness Prevention Program Director

HomeStart, Inc