



September 26, 2023

Senate Chair  
Senator Lydia Edwards  
Joint Committee on the Housing

House Chair  
Representative James Arciero  
Joint Committee on the Housing

**Re: JDI's Support of S. 864, An Act promoting access to counsel & housing stability in Massachusetts**

Dear Chairs:

Jane Doe Inc, The Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence (JDI) brings together organizations and people committed to ending sexual assault and domestic violence and creating a more just and equitable world.

We join with the Massachusetts Access to Counsel Coalition, a broad-based coalition of over 240 organizations, **to urge the Housing Committee to report favorably S. 864, An Act promoting access to counsel and housing stability in Massachusetts.** S. 864 would establish a statewide Access to Counsel Program for income eligible low-income tenants and landlord owner-occupants in eviction proceedings.

JDI supports S. 864 because this bill brings a central tenet of survivor-advocacy, access to quality counsel, to the housing context. This bill recognizes that access to counsel, or the lack thereof, can make or break the likelihood of maintaining safe and stable housing.

For survivors of SA/DV in the aftermath of violence and trauma, the weeks, months and even years following an act of violence can be a critical time that directly impacts a survivor's long-term safety and stability. Economic insecurity is a hallmark of the aftermath of surviving violence because so often, emotional support systems, places of employment, childcare options, educational milestones and so much more are disrupted amidst a crisis that demands attention to safety and survival.

For survivors facing eviction, often as a direct result of the loss of economic support of a violent partner, maintaining housing stability can be life-giving. It can allow survivors to focus on their healing and economic stability over the crisis of housing insecurity.

Navigating legal systems and housing access is complex enough for most residents of

the Commonwealth. Successfully navigating legal systems amidst the aftermath of severe trauma can feel nearly impossible to many survivors. Adding provisions that will provide counsel for our most vulnerable residents, and especially survivors, facing eviction will directly improve survivor economic stability.

The trauma of evictions has and continues to be disproportionately felt by those most at risk for sexual assault and domestic violence. As the Women's National Law Center reported, women are evicted 16% more often than men, and eviction rates are higher for women of color: each year, 36.3% more Black women are evicted than Black men.<sup>1</sup> Domestic violence survivors can face evictions due to that violence and are often unaware of eviction defenses. Mothers are being evicted far more frequently than others,<sup>2</sup> and having children is the single greatest predictor of whether someone will face eviction.<sup>3</sup>

It is frightening to receive an eviction notice and daunting to represent yourself in court, especially if you have to go court unrepresented. The impact on survivors is compounded as housing instability heightens risk of further harm from domestic abuse and sexual violence. For survivors and families facing eviction, **legal representation is a life line.**

We hope that the Housing Committee will take action to report **S. 864** out favorably so that we can assure people in our communities that they will not be alone when facing eviction.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juma Saeng-Sumski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Middlebrooks, National Women's Law Center, "The Eviction Crisis is a Women's Crisis - The Right to Counsel Can Help," 6-28-2021, [nwlc.org/blog/the-eviction-crisis-is-a-womens-crisis-the-right-to-counsel-can-help/](https://nwlc.org/blog/the-eviction-crisis-is-a-womens-crisis-the-right-to-counsel-can-help/)

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Sandler, "America Could Soon Face a Wave of Single Moms Being Evicted. A Simple Solution Exists That Could Help Them," Time, May 28, 2021, <https://time.com/6052556/evictions-single-moms-covid-19/>

<sup>3</sup> Bryce Covert, "Why Landlord Target Mothers for Eviction," The New Republic, March 16, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/161578/landlords-target-mothers-eviction-crisis-covid>

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