

March 26, 2024

The Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues
Chair, Senate Committee on Ways and Means
State House Room 212, Boston, MA 02108

The Honorable Aaron M. Michlewitz
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
State House Room 243, Boston, MA 02108

In Support of Access to Counsel Line Item and Bills

Dear Rodrigues and Chair Michlewitz and Members of the Joint Committee on Housing:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

I never thought I would become homeless, but I did.

My name is Renee Spencer. I am a public housing tenant in Wellesley and Resident Board Member on the Wellesley Housing Authority Board. I am also a Town Meeting Member, on the board member of Wellesley Friendly Aid, and a proud member of the League of Women Voters.

I was homeless for 4 years after an eviction process that should have gone differently.

12 years ago, the Wellesley Housing Authority brought eviction proceedings against me for non-payment of rent. For 32 years, I had been a good tenant, I was very active in public service, I helped other tenants in my community, and raised my son in the apartment I was evicted from.

When I fell behind on rent I was working hard, holding two jobs, but it wasn't enough.

One day, I came home to an eviction notice on my door. I will never forget this. The next week, I went to court by myself with over \$500 in cash to put towards a payment plan with the housing authority. I planned to work with the housing authority to pay what I owed and I thought my long history as a responsible tenant would help me negotiate a payment plan. I was wrong.

I was alone and unrepresented. The housing authority had a lawyer - I did not.

In court, I tried to explain my long history, spanning decades, with the housing authority and made clear that I had been a good tenant for over 32 years. I just needed a little help. The judge urged the housing authority's attorney to negotiate with me because I had come to court with money in hand to put towards a payment plan.

But the housing authority's attorney refused. **So I was evicted. I was devastated. And I was homeless.**

After the initial shock wore off, I packed my things into my car and moved in with my sister a couple of days later. For 4 years I relied on friends and family for shelter and it was 4 very long years. It was embarrassing, and I walked away from public service and from helping tenants because of the trauma.

After some time, my eviction motivated me to help other tenants. I am back as a tenant in Wellesley Public Housing and was appointed as commissioner for Wellesley Housing Authority board.

I know better than most the difference a lawyer can make because I was unrepresented. It feels like when you are by yourself in an eviction, you have no chance at all. Having a lawyer on your side is the difference between staying in your home or being forced to leave without your control.

The amount of unhoused in our state is increasing and the Access to Counsel program could be a way for so many to keep their homes.

Please include \$3.5 Million in the FY25 Budget to start an Access to Counsel program, with the full Access to Counsel bill.

So many tenants across Massachusetts desperately need it. No one should have to face evictions alone. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Renee Spencer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Renee Spencer
Wellesley, Massachusetts