

January 18, 2024

Honorable Lydia Edwards
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Honorable James Arciero
House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

In Support of S. 864 - An Act promoting access to counsel and housing stability in Massachusetts (Senator DiDomenico)

Chair Edwards and Chair Arciero and Members of the Joint Committee on Housing: Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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

My name is Renee Spencer, I have spoken to you before. I am a public housing tenant in Wellesley and Resident Board Member on the Wellesley Housing Authority Board. I am also a proud member of the League of Women Voters.

I was homeless for four 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. He was away at college 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 and 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 four years I relied on friends and family for shelter. Four 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. As I stated, I also am a member of the League of Women Voters, Town Meeting Member, and a board member on Wellesley Friendly Aid. 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. Everyone deserves a home.

We need to establish an Access to Counsel program in Massachusetts. Access to Counsel should be part of this bond bill. Please include it, so many tenants across Massachusetts desperately need it. No one should have to face evictions alone. Thank you.

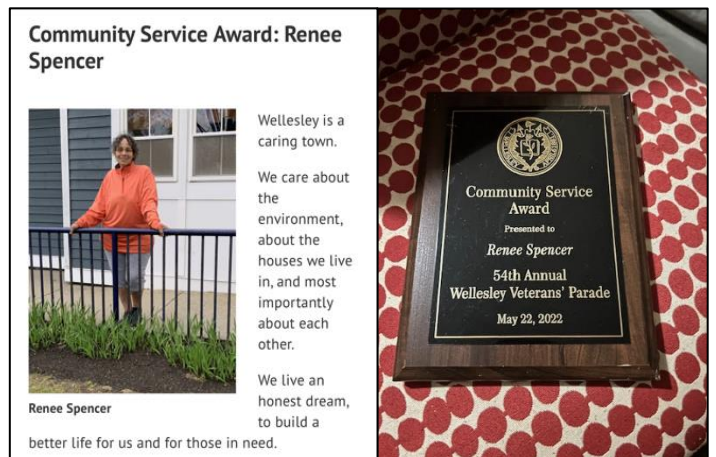
Sincerely,

/s/ Renee Spencer

Renee Spencer
Wellesley, Massachusetts



Me in front of my car with all of my belongings after I was evicted by the Wellesley Housing Authority.



Me in 2022 receiving a community service award from the Town of Wellesley after I was able to move back into the Wellesley Housing Authority.