

**TESTIMONY OF PROJECT HOPE IN SUPPORT OF
S.831/H.968 An Act Promoting Homelessness Prevention in Massachusetts**

Kristin Haas, Data and Policy Coordinator
September 26, 2017

Chairman Brownsberger, Chairwoman Cronin, and Members of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate bill 831, sponsored by Senator DiDomenico, and House bill 968, sponsored by Representative Tyler. By ensuring that low-income renters have access to legal representation in eviction proceedings, this legislation would help struggling households across the Commonwealth to stay in their homes and avoid becoming homeless. On behalf of Project Hope, I urge the Committee to report on these bills quickly and favorably.

Project Hope is a nonprofit social service agency that serves low-income families in the Dorchester and Roxbury neighborhoods of Boston. Project Hope operates a small family shelter and a family childcare business enterprise, in addition to providing a variety of housing services, job training programs, and adult education classes.

In 2016, Project Hope – in partnership with HomeStart, Inc. and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) – conducted a study of 2014 Boston Housing Court data. Our research revealed that only 4% of the 5,181 tenants brought to court in 2014 received full legal representation, compared to 82% of the property owners who filed cases. Not surprisingly, tenants who had legal representation were less likely to be evicted than those who received no legal assistance (18% vs. 32%). This difference was even more significant when we looked specifically at cases involving tenants who lived in subsidized housing (15% of subsidized tenants with legal representation were evicted, compared with 33% of those with no legal assistance).

Over 40% of the tenants who received full legal representation were represented by attorneys working for just two legal service providers, Greater Boston Legal Services and Harvard Legal Aid Bureau. With limited capacity among pro bono legal service organizations and with the cost of representation out of reach for most tenants (especially those residing in subsidized housing), it is unsurprising that the disparity in representation between tenants and landlords is so significant.

S.831/H.968 would go a long way in rectifying these disparities by making legal representation in eviction proceedings a right, rather than a privilege. If a tenant could not afford his or her own attorney, one would be appointed by the Massachusetts Committee for Public Counsel Services. This bill would not only help ensure that tenants understand and exercise their legal rights, but would also prevent families from becoming homeless and entering the emergency shelter system.

We urge the Committee to favorably report out this important legislation, and we thank you for your commitment to ensuring justice for all Massachusetts residents.