

### **Housing Committee**

Public Testimony of the CT Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

H.B. 6531: *An Act Concerning the Right to Counsel in Eviction Proceedings*

H.B. 6528: *An Act Concerning the Sealing of Eviction Records*

Submitted by: Nicole Sanclemente, Policy and Program Associate

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-seven years, CWEALF has been a leader in the development of policy solutions that enhance women's economic security, combat discrimination and increase gender equity.

Through CWEALF's Legal Education Program, we also provide information, education, referrals, and bilingual advocacy to the Connecticut community to ensure that all individuals in our state have access to legal justice. The majority of CWEALF's clients are low-income women with at least one dependent, many of whom have experienced domestic or family violence. Many of our clients also deal with housing insecurity which adds another layer of challenge as they combat the intersecting issues in their lives.

CWEALF urges the committee to support **H.B. No. 6531: *An Act Concerning the Right to Counsel in Eviction Proceedings.***

The current COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated issues with Connecticut's housing system that existed long before the crisis struck. Prior to COVID-19, four Connecticut cities ranked in the top 100 of the highest urban eviction rates in the country.

Families of color in Connecticut are more likely to face eviction, corroborating the stance that the eviction crisis is a racial justice issue. Connecticut's Black and Latinx families are two times as likely to have evictions filed against them compared to their white counterparts. Evictions affect other aspects of a person's overall life and wellbeing including employment, education, and their physical and mental health.

Access to stable and affordable housing is also a women's rights issue: prior to the pandemic women were more likely to live in poverty than men in Connecticut. Eleven percent (11%) of women in Connecticut live in poverty, but this number jumps to 31% in cities like Hartford. Research from United Way prior to COVID-19 indicates that across the state 47.8% of women under the age of 65 do not have income sufficient to cover household essentials, which in turn negatively affects the ability for them to take care of themselves and their families. During the COVID-19 public health crisis, women are more vulnerable to job loss and financial instability, triggering a "she-cession" where job and income losses impact women more severely than men.

Evictions destabilize the lives of Connecticut residents, especially women of color who continue to shoulder the devastating effects of the current pandemic. House Bill No. 6531 will ensure that tenants are fair legal representation in the housing process. In Connecticut, less than 7% of tenants have legal representation in eviction proceedings, compared to over 80% of the landlord community who does. The eviction process is highly technical and fast-moving. The passage of H.B. 6531 will provide the opportunity for tenants to navigate the process efficiently and effectively with the appropriate support.

CWEALF supports H.B. 6531, but recommends the following suggestions to strengthen the current bill language:

- Creation of a program office in a state agency, or contracting directly with the Connecticut Bar Foundation or a non-profit to administer it;
- Establishing a program advisory committee that includes low-income tenants;
- Guaranteeing representation by legal non-profit organizations experienced in eviction defense;
- Allowing tenants to apply for a lawyer directly with legal non-profit organizations without going to court; and,
- Covering administrative hearings to terminate vouchers and public housing tenancies.

CWEALF also urges the committee to support **H.B. No. 6528: *An Act Concerning the Sealing of Eviction Records.***

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a severe eviction crisis in our state and across the nation, the impacts of which will be felt for decades to come. Currently, anyone who has an eviction filed against them maintains an eviction record regardless of the reason why. Data collection companies include these records in their databases, which result in the information existing for years on the State Judicial website. Landlords then deny renter applications based on their eviction history.

House Bill No.6528 will seal all eviction actions when filed within the court, which will prevent landlords and tenant screening companies from discriminating against folks who have an eviction case filed against them.

House Bill No. 6528 will not deny a landlord their rights in the housing process and will not overturn their right to reject tenant applications if the tenant cannot afford housing, threatens to damage the unit, or threatens the health or safety of the landlord or other tenants.

CWEALF urges the Committee to vote favorably on H.B. 6531 with recommended amendments and H.B. 6528 to take necessary steps towards recognizing housing as a critical issue to women and families' economic security and a fundamental human right.