

Testimony of Anthony Overton
Tenant & Former Client of The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia

Committee on the Judiciary
Council of the District of Columbia

Budget Hearing – D.C. Access to Justice Initiative
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I am here today to tell you about what it meant to me to have a lawyer from Legal Aid to represent me in my housing cases.

When I started having problems with my landlord, I could not afford to pay for my own attorney. I was hesitant about using free legal services. I was afraid I would get a lawyer who was not experienced or did not know how to handle the landlord. At first, I decided to try to handle my cases on my own.

At my trial in Landlord Tenant Court, I finally realized that I probably needed an attorney to help me sort this all out. The judge could not help me as an attorney, but he helped me see that what was happening was not right. That is when I finally went to Legal Aid.

Once I started working with my attorney from Legal Aid, I saw how valuable free legal services can be. My lawyer took a lot of stress off me. She was able to argue the law and respond to all of the landlord's points. The landlord tried to intimidate her, but she did not back down. She found information about my landlord that I had not been able to find.

The lawyers from Legal Aid do not play. They are serious about their cases and helping their clients. They really fight for their clients.

It is very rare to find an honest lawyer. I could tell where my lawyer's heart was. She was honest and cared about me and my case. She cared about my well-being. She gave me choices and let me make decisions. She would advise me about my options, but she always left the final decision up to me.

Now that I have worked with Legal Aid, I wish I had a lawyer from the beginning of my cases. When you are fighting a slumlord, you really need a lawyer to help you through the system. I was able to do a lot on my own, but a lot of tenants do not know where to go to get help or what to do. Now I refer lots of other tenants to Legal Aid for help.

I have some other concerns about landlord-tenant issues that I learned from my experience. I want to share some of these concerns with the Council this morning.

- **Office of the Tenant Advocate.** The Office of the Tenant Advocate was very helpful. They connected me with DCRA and helped to advocate for me. They should get more funding so that they can expand their offices and advertise more to the public. I don't think most tenants know where to go to get help.

- **Court System.** I ended up with four different cases in three different courts with three different judges. The judges did not coordinate or communicate with each other. I got bounced around and finally lost my job because I had to miss so much work. The landlord took advantage of the confusion in the court system to delay everything.
- **Housing Conditions Court.** The Housing Conditions Court needs to have clearer deadlines for landlords to make repairs. It was not until almost four months after my case was filed that the landlord finally was ordered to turn on the gas. Tenants also should be able to pay their rent into escrow when they file a case in court.
- **DCRA.** DCRA needs to do a better job with re-inspections, especially when the landlord is doing patchwork repairs. DCRA would say that problems were fixed in my apartment when they were not. Problems like infestation take a lot of serious work to get fixed.
- **Mold.** DCRA and the Department of the Environment were confused about which agency was responsible for inspecting for mold in our building. This is a serious health and safety issue for tenants, especially with young children. D.C. needs to have clear standards about mold.

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Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Council.