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DELAWARE STATE SENATE
152nd GENERAL ASSEMBLY

SENATE BILL NO. 1

AN ACT TO AMEND TITLE 25 OF THE DELAWARE CODE RELATING TO THE RESIDENTIAL LANDLORD-TENANT CODE.

1 WHEREAS, before the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 18,000 eviction cases were filed each year in this
2 State which has only 101,000 rental households; and

3 WHEREAS, evictions create significant costs for state and local government related to shelter funding, education
4 funding, health care provided in hospitals instead of community-based providers, transportation costs for homeless youth,
5 and foster care; and

6 WHEREAS, the Delaware Access to Justice Commission has found that “Legal aid organizations have the
7 resources to serve the civil legal needs of only one-eighth of Delaware’s low-income population, leaving a large justice
8 gap”; and

9 WHEREAS, numerous studies from around the country have shown that many tenants have defenses to the
10 eviction that they are not able to assert, either at all or successfully, without the assistance of representation; and

11 WHEREAS, evictions have a disparate impact on Black and Latinx households in this State; and

12 WHEREAS, the General Assembly seeks to end the disparate impact of evictions based on race and gender; and

13 WHEREAS, evictions have significant, well-documented, and long-lasting effects on the lives of individuals and
14 families, including poorer physical and mental health, increased risk of homelessness, increased risk of employment loss,
15 loss of personal property, damage to credit standing, and relocation into substandard housing; and

16 WHEREAS, evictions, and the subsequent housing instability and displacement, damage the lives of children by
17 negatively impacting their mental and physical health, decreasing school attendance rates, impeding academic performance,
18 increasing instances of school discipline, and increasing the likelihood of out of home placement; and

19 WHEREAS, providing a right to representation to tenants in eviction cases is a proven means of significantly
20 reducing the disruptive displacement of families and the resulting social, economic, and public health costs of such
21 displacement; and

WHEREAS, tenants must be able to invoke and enforce the right to legal representation in any eviction-related proceeding to provide for equal access to justice and the courts; and

WHEREAS, the General Assembly declares that tenants facing an eviction from their home have a right to legal representation in eviction proceedings and related matters, and that the State should provide this legal representation to tenants to assist in the fair administration of justice.

NOW, THEREFORE:

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF DELAWARE:

Section 1. Amend Part III, Title 25 of the Delaware Code by making deletions as shown by strike through and insertions as shown by underline as follows:

Chapter 56. Right to Legal Representation in Evictions and Other Landlord-Tenant Actions.

§ 5601. Definitions.

For purposes of this chapter:

(1) “Coordinator” means the Right to Representation Coordinator within Delaware Volunteer Legal Services.

(2) “Covered individual” means a tenant who is eligible for legal representation under this chapter.

(3) “Covered proceeding” means any of the following:

a. A judicial or administrative proceeding to evict, terminate the tenancy of, or terminate the housing subsidy of a covered individual.

b. A proceeding deemed by a designated organization as the functional equivalent of a proceeding described in paragraph (3)a. of this section.

c. A judicial or administrative proceeding to remedy a violation of law related to landlord-tenant matters, such as retaliatory actions, security deposits, habitability, illegal eviction, or violation of quiet use and enjoyment.

(4) “Designated organization” means a nonprofit entity designated by the Attorney General that has the ability to provide legal representation to covered individuals.

(5)a. “Legal representation” means ongoing high-quality representation provided by a designated organization to a covered individual, and all legal advice, advocacy, and assistance associated with that representation.

b. “Legal representation” includes all of the following:

1. The filing of a notice of appearance on behalf of the covered individual in a covered proceeding.

2. Representation of covered individuals by non-attorneys, if the Rules of the Supreme Court permit the representation.

§ 5602. Right to legal representation.

52 (a)(1) Except as provided under subsection (a)(2) of this section, a covered individual has the right to legal
53 representation as provided under this chapter if the covered individual's household income is not greater than 200% of the
54 federal poverty guidelines, as established and updated periodically by the United States Department of Health and Human
55 Services.

56 (2) A covered individual is not entitled to receive legal representation from a designated organization if any of
57 the following apply:

58 a. The covered individual's landlord has an ownership interest in 3 or fewer rental units and is not
59 represented by an attorney or an agent authorized by a rule of the Supreme Court.

60 b. A designated organization determines that there is a conflict of interest.

61 c. A designated organization declines representation for one or more of the following reasons:

62 1. A covered individual does not comply with the application or representation process.

63 2. Rules of professional conduct warrant withdrawal.

64 3. Appeals are deemed by an attorney to lack merit.

65 d. Other circumstances exist which make legal representation infeasible to render.

66 (b) A covered individual is entitled to receive legal representation from a designated organization in a covered
67 proceeding and as soon as practicable after any of the following:

68 (1) A landlord provides a notice to the tenant under § 5502 of this title that rent is past due, under § 5513 of
69 this title that the tenant has violated a material provision of the lease, or under § 5106 of this title that the tenant must
70 vacate the premises.

71 (2) The initiation of an eviction proceeding.

72 (3) The covered individual has been notified that the covered individual's housing subsidy has been
73 terminated.

74 (4) The determination by a designated organization that a proceeding arising from the landlord-tenant
75 relationship on behalf of a covered individual should be initiated.

76 (c) Legal representation must be provided by the time of a covered individual's first scheduled appearance in a
77 covered proceeding. If a covered individual appears in a judicial or administrative proceeding for the first scheduled
78 appearance without legal representation, the court or administrative body shall inform the covered individual of the right to
79 and availability of legal representation.

(d) In a case involving rental arrears, a covered individual shall immediately be referred to the Delaware Housing Assistance Program, or any successor rental assistance program, and shall receive assistance in applying for and obtaining housing assistance as part of the individual's legal representation.

(e) The rights in this section are subject to, and qualified by, the availability of legal representation under § 5604 of this title and the implementation period under § 5607 of this title. An individual does not have a cause of action against the Coordinator or designated organization based on the unavailability of legal representation.

§ 5603. Right to Representation Coordinator duties.

(a) The Coordinator shall manage the contracts awarded by the Attorney General under § 5604 of this title.

(b) The Coordinator shall conduct outreach, engagement, and education events and activities regarding the rights in this chapter and may enter into contracts or issue grants to fulfill the Coordinator's duty under this section. Subject to the availability of appropriate funding, the education events and activities must include all of the following:

(1) Hosting in-person and virtual know-your-rights trainings and other workshops for tenants.

(2) Distributing written information to tenants.

(3) Outreach to tenants regarding how to form and maintain tenant associations.

(4) Referring tenants to designated organizations as appropriate.

§ 5604. Attorney General powers and duties.

(a) The Attorney General, within the limits of an appropriation from the General Assembly, shall designate and contract with one or more designated organizations to provide the services required under this chapter and shall provide each designated organization contracted with under this chapter with fair and just compensation to allow each designated organization to provide an organizational structure with appropriate supervision, caseloads, and oversight of staff and service delivery to promote high quality legal representation and legal work.

(b) The Attorney General may adopt rules and regulations to implement this chapter.

§ 5605. Annual report.

(a) Not later than August 31 of each year, each designated organization shall report to the Coordinator information on services provided in conformity with requirements developed by the Coordinator.

(b) Not later than November 30 of each year, the Coordinator shall prepare a report, which must be approved by the Attorney General and include information from the prior fiscal year regarding all of the following:

(1) The number of covered individuals served.

(2) The extent of legal representation performed.

(3) Metrics on evaluating outcomes.

110 (4) The engagement and education of tenants.

111 (5) The Justice of the Peace Court's experience with the process.

112 (b) The annual report must be posted on the Attorney General's website.

113 § 5606. Additional required disclosures.

114 A landlord, or housing authority as defined under § 4301 of Title 31, shall provide a tenant with an informational
115 brochure approved by the Coordinator that explains legal representation available to tenants, including a right to
116 representation under this chapter, and identifies available resources. The brochure must be provided by the landlord or
117 housing authority at all of the following events:

118 (1) On signing a written rental agreement or entering into a rental agreement that is oral.

119 (2) When a tenant is notified of the termination of a rental agreement.

120 (3) When a tenant receives notice of the termination of a housing subsidy.

121 § 5607. Implementation.

122 (a) The Coordinator shall phase in, over a period of time not to exceed 3 years from [the effective date of this Act],
123 in a manner that the Coordinator determines appropriate, the legal representation required to be provided under § 5602 of
124 this title.

125 (b) The Coordinator shall consider all of the following in determining how services are prioritized during the
126 implementation period:

127 (1) Prioritizing households that include a child or pregnant woman.

128 (2) Prioritizing households with household income below 100% of federal poverty guidelines.

129 (3) Prioritizing targeted zip codes with high eviction rates.

130 (4) Prioritizing veterans or active duty members of the United States Armed Forces, including the National
131 Guard or the reserves.

132 (5) The availability of funding.

133 (6) The availability of trained and qualified attorneys to provide legal representation.

134 (7) Any other appropriate consideration.

135 Section 2. Amend Chapter 57, Title 25 of the Delaware Code by making deletions as shown by strike through and
136 insertions as shown by underline as follows:

137 § 5702A. Residential eviction diversion program.

138 (a)(1) Not later than 270 days after [the effective date of this Act], the Justice of the Peace Court or the Court's
139 designee shall establish a residential eviction diversion program to facilitate post-filing eviction dispute resolution between
140 landlords and tenants, which must include all of the following:

141 a. A conciliation conference between a landlord and tenant to facilitate an agreement for asserted rental
142 agreement violations or non-payment of rent.

143 b. A designated United States Housing and Urban Development certified housing counselor or other
144 representative approved by the Justice of the Peace Court or the Court's designee for the tenant that does all of the
145 following:

146 1. Participates in the conciliation conference.

147 2. Engages with the tenant before the conciliation conference to educate and discuss available
148 resources.

149 c. Any other dispute resolution methods established under the residential eviction diversion program.

150 (2) The Justice of the Peace Court or the Court's designee may limit or otherwise modify the scope of services
151 provided by the residential eviction diversion program to ensure that the cost of the program does not exceed the
152 funding allocated to the program and to ensure that the number of staff required to run the program does not exceed the
153 number of staff available.

154 (b) In designing and implementing the residential eviction diversion program, the Justice of the Peace Court or the
155 Court's designee may be guided by the Residential Mortgage Foreclosure Mediation Program established by the Superior
156 Court under Superior Court Administrative Directive 2013-2 and any subsequent changes made by Superior Court.

157 (c)(1) Except as provided under paragraph (c)(2) of this section, after a landlord has filed an action for possession
158 under this chapter, the case is to be scheduled for mediation. Mediation is to be scheduled during the period between filing
159 and trial. A trial may not commence until the landlord has engaged in mediation, except in cases where a tenant fails to
160 engage in mediation within 15 calendar days after service of process. A tenant's failure to engage in mediation may not
161 delay the scheduling or commencement of trial.

162 (2) A landlord may not be required to participate in the residential eviction diversion program in a proceeding
163 under §§ 5115, 5513(b), or 5513(c) of this title, or where the landlord alleges and by substantial evidence demonstrates
164 to the Court that a tenant has caused or threatens to cause substantial or irreparable harm to landlord's or other tenant's
165 person or property.

166 Section 3. If any provision of this Act or the application of this Act to any person or circumstance is held invalid,
167 the provisions of this Act are severable if the invalidity does not affect the other provisions of this Act that can be given
168 effect without the invalid provision or the application of this Act that can be given effect without the invalid application.

169 Section 4. Sections 1 and 6 of this Act take effect 120 days after its enactment into law.

170 Section 5. Section 2 of this Act takes effect on the date of publication in the Register of Regulations of a notice by
171 the Controller General that funds are appropriated to implement Section 2 of this Act. The Controller General shall provide
172 notice to the Registrar of Regulations that the funds were appropriated. Until Section 2 of this Act takes effect, the Justice
173 of the Peace Court shall adapt its Online Dispute Resolution program to function as a mandatory mediation process to
174 facilitate post-filing eviction dispute resolution between landlords and tenants.

175 Section 6. The Right to Representation Coordinator shall provide the General Assembly with a copy of the first
176 annual report due under § 5605 of Title 25 of the Delaware Code to determine if additional funding is needed to address the
177 fiscal impact of this Act on the Justice of the Peace Court.

SYNOPSIS

This Act creates a right to representation for tenants in evictions and other landlord-tenant actions.

The disruptive displacement that accompanies eviction proceedings creates significant costs for state and local government related to shelter funding, education funding, health care provided in hospitals instead of community-based providers, transportation costs for homeless youth, and foster care. Evictions and disruptive displacement also have significant, well-documented, and long-lasting effects on the lives of individuals and families, including poorer physical and mental health, increased risk of homelessness, increased risk of employment loss, loss of personal property, damage to credit standing, and relocation into substandard housing. Further, evictions fall disproportionately on Black and Latinx families, who have also been the hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis.

Section 1 of this Act establishes a right to representation for evictions and other landlord-tenant actions for covered individuals with household incomes below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines. The Attorney General shall contract with legal services providers for the provision of representation in proceedings covered by this Act. The Right to Representation Coordinator will manage the contracts and work with community organizations to do outreach and education regarding the right to representation. Section 1 of this Act requires landlords to provide notice of the right to representation at periodic designated intervals in the tenancy and in eviction proceedings.

Section 2 of this Act authorizes the creation of a residential eviction diversion program modeled after the Superior Court's Residential Mortgage Foreclosure Mediation Program.

Section 3 of this Act is a severability clause.

Section 4 of this Act makes Sections 1 and 6 effective 120 days after the Act's enactment.

Section 5 of this Act makes Section 2 of this Act contingent on funding.

Section 6 requires the Coordinator to provide the General Assembly with a copy of the first annual report required under § 5605 of Title 25, as contained in this Act, to determine if additional funding is needed to address the fiscal impact of the Act on the Justice of the Peace Court.

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