

ADRIENNE A. JONES
SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

10th Legislative District
Baltimore County



H-101 State House
Annapolis, Maryland 21401-1991
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The Maryland House of Delegates

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401-1991

August 31, 2020

The Honorable Lawrence J. Hogan
Governor
State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Governor Hogan:

Throughout this pandemic, you have rightly told Maryland families that they are safer at home. But starting this week, thousands of our neighbors may be evicted from their homes, risking their safety and health and Maryland's economic recovery efforts.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 15 percent of our state's households faced housing insecurity. But the pandemic-induced recession has exacerbated our existing challenges. The recent reduction in federal unemployment benefits will push more renters to the brink of homelessness.

On Monday, August 31, for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic reached our state, Maryland's district courts began to hear Failure to Pay Rent cases. You have ignored calls from legislative leaders and advocates to prohibit evictions until 2021. Experts now project that hundreds of thousands of Marylanders may be at risk of eviction in the coming months and year. People of color—and especially Black women—will bear the heaviest burden from these evictions.

We urge you to increase funding for the state's rental assistance program and commit funding for a tenant legal assistance program through the end of the year. As the Governor, only you have the power to fund these programs during this fiscal year. We're asking you to use that budget authority to prevent a potential wave of evictions. We are also writing to urge you to take further actions that are within your power to implement immediately.

First, both landlords and tenant advocates agree that the money you've allocated to rental assistance is woefully inadequate to mitigate this crisis. It would cost \$238 million to cover only one month of rent for the approximately 223,000 Marylanders that the National Low Income

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Housing Coalition estimates need immediate assistance. Your \$30 million commitment represents only 13 percent of this total, a far lower percentage than any other state in the region.

Second, offering tenants free legal assistance will ensure that every Marylander with a right to stay in their home is able to do so. Because few can afford an attorney, almost every renter in the state is forced to navigate complex eviction proceedings without legal counsel. A legal assistance program will level the playing field of justice and allow vulnerable Marylanders an opportunity to remain in their homes. Additionally, a recent study found that every \$1 spent on free legal assistance could save the state \$6 in avoided costs related to displacement. These budget savings would be especially valuable during this tough economic climate.

Third, timely, disaggregated, and detailed data collection will be critical for leaders at all levels of government in our state to respond to this eviction crisis. We urge you to instruct the Department of Housing and Community Development to work with Maryland Courts to create a user-friendly data reporting mechanism that shows trends in eviction complaints, number of writs carried out, the communities most impacted by evictions, as well as data related to the use of the affirmative defense that you implemented in your previous executive order.

Finally, we ask that you follow many of your counterparts in other states by prohibiting landlords from both reporting coronavirus-related nonpayment to credit bureaus and charging coronavirus-related late fees through the end of the year. These are common-sense steps to limit the financial pain that the coronavirus is causing so many working families in Maryland.

With a couple strokes of a pen, you can alleviate imminent hardship for thousands of families in our state. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Speaker Adrienne A. Jones

Delegate Vaughn Stewart

Majority Leader Eric Luedtke

Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins

Speaker Pro Tem Sheree Sample-Hughes

Majority Whip Talmadge Branch

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