Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility strongly supports HB52. Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility is an evidenced base health organization with over 700 supporters that advocates for public health programs that reduce the risk of nuclear war, address the climate crisis, and pandemic risks all through the lens of racial justice and equity.

Evictions cause a significant and lasting increase in homelessness, and an increase use of emergency rooms, mental health problems, and mortality. A diversion from eviction program is good public health policy and therefore Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility supports HB52. Those brought before courts for eviction are disproportionately black. A study in Massachusetts before the pandemic found the mortality rate of the unsheltered was 10 x the mortality rate of statewide housed populations. Low-income women of color are the highest risk population. In an Abell foundation study in Baltimore rent court, of 300 people surveyed, an astounding 94% of those interviewed were black, 79% women and 65% lived with children. Even without this pandemic, housing is health. Inadequate housing is associated with chronic asthma, is dangerous for children’s development especially for those under 5. Young children exposed to overcrowding and/or multiple moves in one year, were more often reported by their caregivers to have poor health, impaired educational, social or emotional skills, and were measured to have low weight compared to other children.

In older children and adolescents, a history of multiple moves has been associated with mental health problems later in life including violence and suicide. Homelessness can be deadly. The homeless have a 5-10 x higher mortality than the housed with average life expectancy was 53 years on one study. And this is before the Covid-19. Housing the homeless and providing health care is cost effective based on a study in Massachusetts that preceded Covid-19.

Estimates are that homeless people who become sick with COVID-19 are twice as likely to be hospitalized, two to four times as likely to require critical care, and two to three times as likely to die than the general population.
If providing housing and healthcare in normal times saves money and lives, it is more important than ever to prevent evictions during a pandemic and with record unemployment.
An investigation by The Baltimore Sun has found that rent court works against tenants, often failing to hold landlords accountable even when the housing in question is uninhabitable. Public policy ideally should promote public health but for rent court, the policies in place do the opposite. They have promoted physical and mental ill health, increased mortality, loss of years of life for those who are victims too often black and low income. This was before Covid-19 and housing insecurity likely contributes to the higher mortality for black and brown in this pandemic. Rent court was long overdue for major revisions that align with racial justice and equity. Covid-19 has highlighted that need.

From October to November 2020, 1110 Maryland families were evicted (out of 4400 heard) just as the pandemic was resurging. Could there be a starker example of bad governance impacting public health.

HB52 brings changes that are long overdue and needed to end Maryland’s high-volume “Failure to Pay Rent” (“FTPR”) eviction dockets:

It establishes a 10-day notice period requiring landlords to inform tenant of alternative payment resolutions (rental assistance, mediated payment plans) and authorizes the judge in certain eviction burdened jurisdictions to set up eviction diversion programs. as preconditions before eviction case can proceed.

There is evidence that this will reduce housing insecurity and evictions and is especially successful when there is support from, landlords, service agencies, nonprofits and judges.

Hopefully these changes will be an incentive for all landlords to maintain properties up to habitable standards and help them keep good tenants who are having temporary difficulties. Even when the pandemic is over, we must try to reduce homelessness and evictions to as low a number as possible permanently. Housing is health. Human rights and good public health policy are intimately related. Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility strongly supports HB52

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