



**Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Housing
Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH)'s Testimony on Urgent Need for
Statewide Right to Counsel (S2721)
February 14, 2024**

Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH) is a faith-based organization dedicated to serving and advocating for our diverse community of over 15,000 members. With the support of more than 40 partner churches across Brooklyn and Queens, we stand alongside primarily Black and brown, immigrant, and low-income New Yorkers who face ongoing challenges due to escalating living costs, soaring rents, and a predatory speculative housing market. CUFFH proudly stands with the Right to Counsel Coalition, representing tenants, legal advocates, unions, and communities statewide. With tens of thousands of tenants relying on our Housing Courts Must Change! Campaign, we're dedicated to addressing New York's eviction crisis.

Since New York City's groundbreaking Right to Counsel law in 2017, over 20 cities, states, and counties nationwide, including Westchester County, have followed suit, yielding impressive outcomes. In NYC alone, 84% of tenants with counsel have kept their homes, while eviction filings plummeted. Similarly, San Francisco and Cleveland saw remarkable declines in eviction rates and increased tenant stability. Yet, outside NYC, most tenants lack this crucial protection. In places like Albany, less than 2% of tenants had legal representation in eviction cases, leaving them vulnerable in housing court. This disparity highlights the urgent need for a Statewide Right to Counsel.

S2721, introduced by Senator Rachel May, guarantees free legal representation for all New Yorkers facing displacement and requires \$260 million in funding for implementation. \$260 million is the necessary first step in empowering a wholesale change in our court system. It's going to allow for tens of thousands more tenants to be represented. It will equip attorneys to fully litigate their cases and help ensure long-term housing stability for tenants. It will transform workplace conditions for legal providers and help us to compete nationally, attracting the next generation of civil legal talent to New York State. It will support organizers whose work is essential to ensuring tenants know what their rights are and how to use them. And it will establish a new state agency,

the Office of Civil Representation, to oversee the Right to Counsel.

We implore your support for S2721 and its budget allocation. CUFFH has witnessed firsthand the effectiveness of Right to Counsel in preserving our members' housing stability. However, we've also experienced the significant challenges in accessing housing lawyers presently. This funding is crucial to bolster one of the most effective anti-eviction measures available to us. It is essential to adequately address the housing crisis we currently face. By ensuring legal representation, we can prevent unnecessary evictions, protect families, and save long-term costs. New York must lead in safeguarding housing rights for all, and we rely on your leadership to make this a reality.

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