



**Metro Housing|Boston's Testimony
Joint Committee on the Judiciary Hearing on Right to Counsel Legislation
(S. 913, H. 3456, and H. 1537) by
Steven Farrell, Director of Communications and Policy**

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Thank you Chairman Eldridge and Chairwoman Cronin and members of the judiciary committee for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on the right to counsel legislation in front of this committee today.

Metro Housing supports these bills, as well as the Right to Counsel Coalition's recommendation for a hybrid bill that incorporates the important concept of upstream assistance for households at risk of eviction.

Metro Housing is a leading nonprofit dedicated to connecting the residents of Greater Boston with safe, decent homes they can afford. We work with residents in Boston and 32 surrounding communities. The foundation of our work is our rental assistance program where we provide rental assistance to more than 9,600 households, and work with 4,300 property owners. Building on this effort, we also provide services to stabilize housing with information, referral, and supports, responding to in excess of 10,000 housing inquires annually.

You will likely hear from many testifying today about the fairness of property owners in housing court **with** representation and tenants **without** representation.

Metro Housing agrees with these statements and more. The power dynamic is unbalanced. There is no even playing field. The stakes are extremely high for these households. At risk is their home, their housing stability, and in one sense, as in other court proceedings, their freedom.

For many residents of Massachusetts, myself included, our only interaction with the court system is jury duty every few years. For those of us who go in for jury duty, we get an orientation about what to expect. In housing court, families present themselves without the benefit an orientation, not to mention legal counsel.

For families at risk of eviction, they are understandably focused on what they are going to do the day **after** housing court. Preparing for the day **of** housing court without orientation or representation is certainly another stressor.

Metro Housing has additional insight related to prevention and addressing crises upstream. One of the programs for which we are best known lends some insight in to how this may work for a housing court: the homelessness prevention program called Rental Assistance for Families in Transition, or RAFT.

RAFT is a critical element of the prevention homelessness landscape for thousands of families in housing crisis and at risk of homelessness due to unexpected medical bills or temporary unemployment. With an average payment of \$2,600 to cover one-time events like rent arrears, utility shortfalls, or security deposits, almost 4,800 families retained their homes and their housing stability last year.

We anticipate that RAFT will work very close in alignment with the upstream solutions identified in the Right to Counsel Coalition's recommendations.

Everyone wants to avoid evictions. They are expensive, time consuming, and anxiety inducing. RAFT and other prevention tools can help families in crisis even before they reach the court-involved process with their property owner.

Metro Housing staff predict that there will be fewer households in housing court this year because upstream RAFT payments will have headed those cases off, a benefit to the families, the property owners, and the court system. However, the remaining families will have more complicated cases and be in even greater need for legal counsel.

For all of these reasons, we encourage you to report favorably on these bills – with the added upstream components – for the benefit of the thousands of families we work with every year.

Thank you.