

Chair Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Peggy P. Lee. I am currently a Senior Staff Attorney with Southeastern Ohio Legal Services in the Athens office.

I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 158.

For context, Southeastern Ohio Legal Services ("SEOLS") serves over 30 counties in rural Appalachian Ohio. Housing-related cases, including eviction, is a huge part of our intake and workload. A lack of safe affordable housing is a constant problem in our rural counties. Not surprisingly, since 2020, these issues were amplified due to the pandemic. One of the biggest obstacles that our client tenant populations face is the inability to find new housing because they had been sued for eviction in the past.

To be clear, the mere fact of an eviction being filed against a tenant, regardless if it was dismissed or not, is being used to deny tenants housing on a regular basis in our areas. Landlords, especially private landlords, are now able to look up tenant names in online dockets as part of their checks when tenants apply for housing since more rural counties are now taking records and dockets online. Furthermore, metropolitan-area courts like Cleveland and Columbus have eviction record sealing procedures built into their court rules and procedures for tenants to pursue. Our SEOLS counties' rural courts do not have such routine processes available as a matter of court rule or procedure, and record sealings must be pursued on a case by case basis.

Why is this such a problem? Rural tenants who are evicted and in need of finding new housing are increasingly at an automatic disadvantage when competing for the same affordable housing as tenants evicted from bigger cities where courts do have routinized eviction sealing processes in place. This is especially true of rural tenants who must look for new housing in bigger cities due to the dearth of sufficient affordable housing to meet tenant needs in their local rural counties. In fact, this issue is so pervasive that tenants I have worked with decided to voluntarily vacate rather than fight a possibly defensible case because they are so fearful of having an eviction on their record. Similarly, landlord attorneys use "no eviction on the tenant's record" with me as a bargaining chip in negotiations where no lawsuit has yet been filed.

Such unfairness would be directly addressed by SB158 by helping to level the playing field on a statewide basis for all Ohioan tenants that need to find new housing, especially if they have had no eviction issues for at least three years. Tenants should not be penalized solely based on where they used to live or in what court they were evicted. Rural communities without homeless shelters should not be subject to having its citizens living in their cars or in unapproved camps solely based where they lived or where they were evicted.

For the above reasons, I support Senate Bill 158.

I thank the Committee for this opportunity to speak this afternoon and I am happy to answer any questions.