

Rent Stabilization Board

May 11, 2021

Assemblymember Philip Ting
Chair, Assembly Budget Committee
State Capitol, Room 6026
Sacramento, CA 95814

Senator Nancy Skinner
Chair, Senate Budget Committee
State Capitol, Room 5094
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: \$200 Million Budget Allocation for Eviction Prevention and the Homelessness Prevention Fund - Support

Dear Chairman Ting and Chairwoman Skinner,

Thank you for your leadership over the past year during these unprecedented times. While California has taken steps to ensure vulnerable Californians are protected from eviction, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the deeply rooted inequalities around accessing justice and the very protections we have put in place for struggling renters. To ensure that Californians are equipped with the necessary tools to access these important protections, and to bolster and speed our statewide recovery, we write to request an investment of state and federal resources in a critical initiative to preserve and improve access to justice in California while stabilizing communities and struggling renters. This is a proven strategy that results in increased housing security for renters, increased efficiency and reduced caseloads in the courts, and considerable savings and improved community stability at the municipal level. Moreover, given the uneven impacts of the pandemic and its severe effects in low-income communities and communities of color, an investment in eviction prevention is an investment in racial justice and an equitable recovery.

On behalf of the City of Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board, we respectfully request \$200 million be allocated for legal assistance for low-income tenants facing the threat of evictions. Providing legal assistance to low-income tenants in eviction cases is a cost-effective way to prevent homelessness and displacement. Studies have demonstrated that eviction defense programs promote settlement agreements, keep tenants housed, and reduce court costs, preventing homelessness and preserving scarce judicial and public resources. For example, a study of a proposed program in Los Angeles found approximately \$4.50 in savings for each dollar invested. Evaluations of local programs across the country have found similar returns on investment, with savings coming from decreased municipal spending on shelter resources and services related to homelessness, but also tied to community stability metrics such as decreased school absences, demonstrating benefits not just for individuals receiving services but for the community as a whole. We urge bold leadership and an investment in California's equitable recovery by advancing the proven model represented in AB 1487.

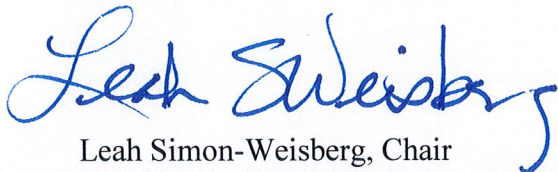
Long before the pandemic hit our state, low-income Californians and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) faced a civil justice gap; many not being able to find the help they needed. Eighty-five percent of Californians facing a civil legal issue receive no or inadequate legal help; in evictions, ninety percent of landlords receive representation compared to only 10% of tenants. Combined with the extreme impacts of the pandemic on communities of color and on renters, we are at the brink of a wave of evictions which could undermine our state's efforts to advance racial justice. Legal aid programs around the state report that while represented tenants have been reasonably successful in asserting their rights under California's COVID-related eviction protections, unrepresented tenants are slipping through the cracks despite qualifying for protection. At current funding levels, there is still only 1 legal aid lawyer for every 5,500 Californians eligible for their services, and we must do better to ensure that all residents are able to contribute to and share in our recovery.

With unprecedented numbers of people facing poverty or extreme poverty for the first time in their lives, and so many renters unable to pay rent through no fault of their own, there is a dramatically increasing need for legal services. With evictions set to resume shortly, the forthcoming need will be unparalleled. Given the State's considerable budget surplus, and the federal government's allocation of approximately \$26 billion to California, now is the time to show bold leadership. We ask the Governor and Legislature to dedicate the necessary funds to invest in access to justice initiatives for those Californians who will inevitably face the legal consequences of the pandemic, and to invest in our communities by allocating funds to prevent homelessness and stabilize our neighborhoods.

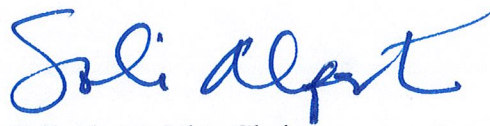
We ask that the Governor and legislature allocate \$200 million in federal funding for the Homelessness Prevention Fund contained in Assembly Bill 1487 (Gabriel) through the American Rescue Plan (ARP). AB 1487 advances a framework for providing eviction prevention services and legal assistance to vulnerable renters in a manner that is efficient, cost-effective and provides numerous benefits not only to renters receiving services but to their broader communities as well. This funding could be allocated from the Emergency Rental Assistance Program which permits 10% of the funds that can be allocated for housing stability services including legal services, Fiscal Recovery Fund which is designated for general response to the COVID-19 and its economic impacts, or from elsewhere in the ARP.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,



Leah Simon-Weisberg, Chair
Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board



Soli Alpert, Vice Chair
Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board