

FY25 Budget Signed by the Governor Provides Funds for Access to Counsel (ATC)

Pilot program to provide lawyers for low-income tenants facing eviction

BOSTON – Today, the Governor signed the FY25 budget and included the House and Senate’s recommendation for \$2.5 million to launch an Access to Counsel pilot program to provide lawyers for low-income tenants facing eviction, an investment proven to decrease housing instability and homelessness.

“This is a significant step forward for housing justice and equity. A significant number of households facing eviction are Black or Brown, and very often are families headed by a single mother,” said Georgia Katsoulomitis, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI). “Gov. Healey, Attorney General Campbell and more than 240 legal, housing, healthcare and faith organizations support Access to Counsel as a way to provide tenants a level playing field, keep families housed, and build safe, healthy communities.”

Annette Duke, senior housing attorney for MLRI, who led a broad coalition that advanced this initiative, said the inequity of legal representation in Massachusetts eviction cases is stark. “In 2023, the Massachusetts Trial Court reported that in non-payment cases in Housing Court, only 2.5% of tenants were represented by a lawyer, while 90% of landlords were represented,” Duke said. “Legal representation is a lifeline to tenants facing and with our legal services and community partners, we look forward to building a sustainable access to counsel program.”

The Pilot program funding will be administered by the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation to provide full representation for low-income tenants and low-income owner-occupied landlords as articulated in bills filed by Rep. Dave Rogers, Rep Mike Day, and Sen. Sal DiDomenico, which were reported out favorably by the Judiciary Committee to House Ways and Means.

In calling for passage of the bill before the Joint Judiciary Committee, Attorney General Campbell said: “The need for this legislation is especially urgent in light of the strain on our emergency shelter system for homeless families. Evictions have long-lasting economic and social impacts on individuals and their families.”

“With this one step,” Gladys Vega, Executive Director of La Colaborativa in Chelsea said, “Massachusetts can start to help struggling families, keep people off the streets and out of crowded shelters, and make sure that there is equity and fairness for all facing eviction, not just for those with the resources to hire an attorney.”

“This comes at a crucial time,” said Danielle Johnson, Boston’s Director of Housing Stability. “Evictions are up, and shelters are reaching their limits; that means the alternative for far too many could be the streets,” Johnson said. “This will help individuals and families stay in their homes and help us to deal with the shelter crisis.”

“Far too many eviction cases end up with a family or individual making an agreement that is not fair, that cannot work, and that ends with them out of their home and either in a shelter or on the street,” said Pamela Schwartz, head of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness. “The Governor, the House and the Senate deserve our thanks for taking a proactive step that can stop that from happening in eviction cases from Boston to the Berkshires.”

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About the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

Founded in 1968, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) is a nonprofit poverty law and policy program that provides statewide advocacy and leadership in advancing laws, policies, and practices that secure economic, racial, and social justice for low-income people and communities. To learn more, visit [MLRI.org](https://www.mlri.org).