

Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Haley DiRenzo, and I serve as the Director of Tenant Legal Services at the Community Economic Defense Project, where I have spent the last five years working on housing issues. I am here in support of HB 26-1251, which would create an important new funding stream for legal aid services like those my organization and others provide across Colorado.

Every month, our office has to turn away hundreds of people who need legal help simply because we do not have the funding to serve them all. These are families facing the loss of their home, parents trying to keep their children stable, and people doing their best to hold their lives together in the middle of a crisis. In eviction cases, most tenants still have to go to court alone, even though more than 77% of landlords have lawyers.

Colorado's Access to Justice Commission has found that the justice gap is especially severe in housing and family law, where the stakes for families are incredibly high. Without legal help, a single court case can change the course of someone's life. Funding legal aid helps make sure people have a fair chance. It means cases are decided on the facts, not on whether someone without a lawyer knew how to navigate a complicated legal system on their own.

Funding legal aid also helps courts work more efficiently. When people have access to an attorney early, the right issues can be identified from the start and cases are more likely to be resolved correctly the first time. Too often, tenants are forced to navigate the process alone, miss important defenses, and only get legal help after judgment has entered. That creates more work for the courts, more uncertainty for the parties, and more instability overall. More funding means more people can get help earlier, which leads to better outcomes and a more efficient system.

We already know this funding model works in Colorado. Specialty license plates have successfully generated funding for other important public priorities, including programs supporting Coloradans with disabilities and efforts to reduce human-wildlife conflict. HB 26-1251 would build on that success by creating a new, practical way to support legal services for low-income Coloradans.

I respectfully ask for your support of HB 26-1251.

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