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Maryland Legal Aid Secures \$1.4M Jury Verdict in Unlicensed Housing Case Involving Older Adults and Tenants with Disabilities

Baltimore, MD – Maryland Legal Aid secured jury verdicts totaling \$1,434,981 on behalf of Ms. Margaret Little and four other Baltimore City tenants living in two unlicensed federally subsidized multi-family rental properties for older adults and people with disabilities.

The properties were plagued by serious and persistent conditions, including mold, rodent infestation, water damage, lack of heat, unsecure buildings, and the absence of necessary accommodations for tenants with physical disabilities. Although Baltimore City law requires rental properties to be licensed and inspected before collecting rent, the landlord continued to charge these tenants rent despite the many serious health and safety violations and the fact that the properties were operating illegally.

The case began as multiple rent escrow actions filed in District Court to compel the landlord to remedy the serious and persistent health and safety violations. When those efforts produced little meaningful change, Maryland Legal Aid filed suit in 2023 claiming fraud and deceit, and violations of the Maryland Consumer Protection Act, the Maryland Consumer Debt Collection Act and related laws against both the owners and the landlord in Baltimore City Circuit Court.

The claims against the landlord were resolved before the first case went to the jury for deliberation. In January, the claims against the owners were tried before two separate juries, one trial for each building. Both juries awarded substantial damages totaling \$1,434,981, including reimbursement of unlawfully collected rent, compensation for emotional distress, and punitive damages. A significant portion of the damages was premised on findings of fraud and deceit.

“This case is about accountability, but it is also about human dignity. Older adults and people with disabilities deserve safe, secure homes that meet basic health and safety standards. The law is a critical tool to enforce those protections. At its core, however, this case underscores a simple principle: no one should have to live in conditions that compromise their health, safety, and basic sense of security,” said Theda Saffo, Staff Attorney, Housing/Consumer Law Unit at Maryland Legal Aid.

Ms. Little, who helped organize her neighbors and bring the conditions to light, reflected on the outcome and what the case meant for her and the other tenants. **“We just wanted a place to live decently. I’m not a young girl. I’m in my seventies and I just wanted quality of life,”** said Margaret Little. **“Maryland Legal Aid was about giving people back their dignity, their justice, and making them feel like ‘hey, you gonna be fine.’”**

She described the moment she learned of the verdict as overwhelming. **“They fought so hard for us. And then we did find out that we were going to be compensated, it was like ‘Oh my God. Jesus, is this true?’”** said Margaret Little.

The verdicts reflect more than a finding of statutory violations. They represent a recognition by members of the community that no one should be required to live in unsafe, unhealthy, and inaccessible housing while paying rent to a landlord operating outside the law.

The next phase of the case is collection. Maryland Legal Aid will continue working with the clients as they pursue enforcement of the judgments to help ensure that the relief awarded by the juries is meaningful.

About Maryland Legal Aid

Established in 1911, Maryland Legal Aid is a statewide nonprofit 501(c)(3) law firm that advocates with and for Marylanders experiencing poverty to achieve equity and social justice through free civil legal services, community collaboration, and systemic change. From its 11 offices across the state and through its many community-based clinics, Maryland Legal Aid helps clients preserve and access safe and affordable housing; maintain custody of their children and be safe from domestic violence; and increase their economic security by defending against consumer debt, including foreclosures and tax sales, removing barriers to employment, and accessing critical income supports such as Medicaid, SNAP, unemployment, and other vital public benefits.