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**STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 125
COURTS – SERVICE OF PROCESS – INCREASE IN SHERIFF’S FEES –
DISTRIBUTION TO RENTAL ALLOWANCE PROGRAM**

**Presented Wednesday, January 30, 2008 to the
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**

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The Maryland Catholic Conference represents the public policy interests of the Roman Catholic bishops serving Maryland’s three (arch)dioceses. The Conference testifies today in support of Senate Bill 125 – Courts – Service of Process – Increase in Sheriff’s Fees – Distribution to Rental Allowance Program Fund.

In their 1973 pastoral statement, *The Right to a Decent Home*, the Catholic Bishops of the United States argued that decent housing is a fundamental right. They wrote, “The protection of the human dignity of every person and the right to a decent home require both individual action and structural policies and practices.” The bishops followed with, “Our concern is not simply for houses or programs but for the people who inhabit these dwellings or are affected by these programs... The statistics we cite are not simply numbers or points on a graph; they are individual human tragedies.”

In this light, we hope you will consider the *Maryland Rental Housing Affordability Index*, issued in 2003 by the State’s Department of Housing and Community Development. According to the *Index*, 37% of Maryland households cannot afford a two-bedroom rental unit. The situation is best in Howard and Worcester Counties, at 21%, and worst in Baltimore City, at 57%. (Please see *Attachment A* for a listing of the percentages of households in each Maryland jurisdiction that cannot afford rental units.)

As the Bishops point out, these 37% of Maryland households are more than a figure in a table. They are real families experiencing the tragedies of homelessness or inadequate housing. The households are made up of parents and children, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews. Each is affected by their family’s difficulty in affording an adequate place to live. Adults worry about how to pay utility, clothing, and food bills

when the great majority of their income goes toward rent. When they can't pay their rent, they strategize on moving between hotels, friends' sofas, and shelters. Children suffer from exposure to unsafe and unstable living conditions.

The Church holds that one of government's primary responsibilities is to ensure that the most basic needs of its people are met. The State of Maryland has a good program to help meet its lowest-income residents' housing needs – but unfortunately, the program isn't well-enough funded to help many of them.

The Rental Allowance Program (RAP), which for several years the State has funded at just \$1.7 million annually, provides grants to local governments to provide rental subsidies to low-income families who are homeless, are in danger of becoming homeless, or have an emergency housing need. Eligible households have incomes at or below 30% of the statewide or area median income, whichever is higher. The monthly payments are based on the size of the family and the location of the rental housing unit in the state. Currently, payments can be received for up to 12 months, and may be extended under special circumstances. RAP has helped fewer than 1,000 families in each of the past several years. Due to an increase in subsidy amounts, far fewer families were helped in 2007 and 2008.

SB 125 would boost funding for RAP by establishing a dedicated funding source – the Rental Allowance Program Fund, which would be funded by \$10 increases in certain fees collected by county sheriffs' offices. Marylanders in the lowest income brackets have a difficult time affording any housing at all, let alone housing that is safe and secure enough for their families. SB 125, by providing a significant boost to RAP, will help very low-income Maryland families acquire the housing they couldn't otherwise afford.

Recognizing housing as a fundamental human right, and also the severe hardship that many Marylanders face in finding housing they can afford, we respectfully ask that you give SB 125 a favorable report. Thank you for your consideration.