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Media Contact: Emme Veenbaas
312-554-1247
eveenbaas@chicagobarfoundation.org

Independent Evaluation Finds Unique Public/Private Collaboration in Chicago and Cook County Fosters Housing Stability for Residents Facing Eviction and Improves Access to Justice

A new report from the global advisory firm Stout found the City of Chicago Right to Counsel pilot ("RTC"), which works hand-in-hand with the Early Resolution Program (ERP) in the Circuit Court of Cook County, forms a unique and innovative model designed to ensure all unrepresented tenants can access high-quality legal assistance in eviction cases tailored to the tenant's circumstances. The report found that the model is making a tangible, positive impact in promoting housing stability and improving access to justice across Cook County.

"This evaluation shows how access to legal representation helps protect vulnerable tenants and keeps Chicagoans stably housed," said Mayor Brandon Johnson. "Thank you to our legal aid organizations, Cook County, the Circuit Court, The Chicago Bar Foundation, and all partners behind the RTC and ERP programs. Together, these initiatives are a groundbreaking approach to preventing homelessness and investing in Chicago's future."

Among the key findings in Stout's report is that the combined ERP + RTC model is unique nationally because it is designed to match level of service – from brief advice and information to extensive legal representation – to each client's needs. The report further found that the ERP+RTC model, with sufficient funding, can be a cost-effective approach to promoting housing stability by tailoring services to the clients' needs.

Other important findings include:

- More than 70% of tenants said they were confident that they would be able to or were able to achieve their housing goals with the help of ERP and RTC.

- For RTC clients with a goal of avoiding eviction, more than 92% of those tenants were able to achieve this goal.

- The number of default court-ordered judgments against tenants (where a tenant did not appear for court) dropped to about 20%, compared to an estimated pre-pandemic default rate of 40-50%.

- More than 76% of tenants in ERP reported that the court system was fair to both parties based on their experience – a rate more than double the average for low- and moderate-income individuals, as found in a recent national study (justicegap.lsc.gov/)

- 96% of tenants receiving ERP services reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with the services.

"Cook County takes immense pride in the Early Resolution Program, a groundbreaking model within the Cook County Legal Aid for Housing and Debt (CCLAHD) initiative that reflects my administration's commitment to collaboration and justice," said Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. "This partnership would not be possible without the leadership of Chief Judge Evans and the dedication of our partners, including The Chicago Bar Foundation, the City of Chicago, and our community-based service organizations. Together, through programs like ERP and RTC, we are ensuring that residents facing eviction have the support they need to maintain stability. This partnership-driven approach is a testament to how we can achieve meaningful outcomes that strengthen both our communities and the individuals within them."

For the RTC pilot specifically, Stout found that the program has assisted clients in achieving their housing stability goals, asserting their rights, and resolving complex housing disputes. Additionally, the program has likely generated significant fiscal benefits for the City of Chicago by reducing costs associated with homelessness and displacement. For every $1 spent on RTC, Chicago likely realized between $2.75 and $3.35 in fiscal benefits between February 2022 and March 2024. According to Stout's findings, when interviewed in ERP, 46% of tenants said they would be unsheltered, or homeless, if evicted from their apartments.

"We are excited by the finding that RTC has been extremely effective in preventing eviction orders against tenants," said Mark Swartz, Executive Director of the Law Center for Better Housing, which is leading the City of Chicago Right to Counsel Pilot Project

and has been a key partner in the ERP program. "We always knew that tenants had defenses and that if they had access to legal advice and representation, as well as the critical changes that the courts have made to their process, they can avoid eviction. We look forward to working with the Johnson Administration and all of the ERP+RTC partners, to build on the results and recommendations of Stout's evaluation."

Stout is working with jurisdictions across the country that are developing, implementing, and/or evaluating eviction diversion, access to counsel or right to counsel programs. In its report, Stout emphasized that ERP+RTC stands out among similar programs nationwide due to its flexible service model, designed to match each client's needs with the appropriate level of support. Stout noted that these unique features make ERP+RTC a scalable, comprehensive model for supporting tenants with legal aid in high-volume cases, such as evictions.

"The Early Resolution Program fosters fairness and equity during the court process of eviction to create fair solutions and promote housing stability for landlords and tenants," said Chief Judge Timothy C. Evans. "ERP is a unique collaboration that allowed the court to modify the eviction process to connect unrepresented landlords and tenants to key resources, including legal aid. When one side is unrepresented, ERP helps correct the inherent power imbalance and helps ensure that each litigant receives fair and equitable justice in each case. Without the support of the Cook County Board, the City of Chicago, and all the ERP partners, the court would not be able to provide such crucial resources during the court process."

The full Stout report is available on The Chicago Bar Foundation website. Tenants at risk of eviction should begin by calling the ERP helpline (855-956-5763) or, if an eviction has been filed, connect with ERP during their first court date. More information on services available through CCLAHD is also available at cookcountylegalaid.org.

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