

OREGON LAW CENTER

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**Testimony in Support of HB 2639
Before the House Human Services and Housing Committee
March 6th, 2013
Submitted by: Sybil Hebb**

Chair Tomei, Vice-Chairs Gomberg and Olson, and members of the committee:

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center, I submit this testimony in support of HB 2639, with its pending amendments. Passage of this bill would have an immensely positive impact on the lives of our clients, Oregon's communities, and our state.

OLC's mission is to achieve justice for low income communities by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. One of the most important issues in the lives of our clients is the challenge to find safe, stable, affordable housing. Safe and stable housing is a basic human need. Housing is about much more than a roof over one's head; it is about opportunity. Without safe and stable housing, it is difficult or impossible for low-income families to hold down a job, keep children in school, access neighborhood amenities, and stay healthy.

In general, there is not enough affordable housing in our state to meet the needs of low-income Oregonians. Affordable housing is often disproportionately difficult to find and maintain for minority communities, single women with children, and people with disabilities.

The Section 8 housing-choice voucher program is absolutely critical to meeting the affordable housing challenge for vulnerable populations. The purpose of the program is to allow for dispersal rather than concentration of poverty and to allow low-income families to relocate to areas where they are closer to job opportunities and where their children will be in good schools. The key feature of the program is that it would allow tenants to use their vouchers to pay rent in the private market, providing them a choice as to where to live, so that they can maximize their opportunities. But the program cannot work if vouchers are not accepted as a form of payment.

HB 2639 would provide critical protection to low-income communities to ensure that voucher holders can seek housing from the full range of the market, just like any other tenant. There is no special protection provided; voucher-holders could be screened according to the same lawful criteria used to screen any other tenant, and landlords can still choose their tenants according to those criteria. HB 2639 will simply remove a current barrier for vulnerable populations seeking housing with a voucher, so that they can compete in the market for stable, affordable housing on a more level playing field.

HB 2639 with its pending amendments recognizes that the Section 8 Voucher program needs to work for everyone: tenants, housing authorities, and landlords. The bill does a good job of balancing these interests. We greatly appreciate the good work of the sponsor, Speaker Kotek,

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and all of the interested parties in coming together to identify the ways in which we could collaborate to streamline and improve the Section 8 voucher experience for all involved. The bill with its amendments reflects those ideas. The risk mitigation fund established by the bill will provide a useful insurance fund for landlords in the event they have un-reimbursed damages to the unit after a tenant moves out. The stable rental housing fund will provide advocates with a flexible tool to help ease the transition from homelessness into housing, or to prevent homelessness in the first place. The bill encourages housing authorities to streamline the process for working with landlords, and all parties are committed to seeking a waiver of federal regulations to further increase flexibility. The parties are all committed to participating in regular meetings to continue the good work we have accomplished thus far.

In closing, I can't adequately thank the Speaker, her staff, and the many dedicated individuals and organizations who have come together over so many months to delve into the details and do the hard work of drafting this bill.

Oregon is stronger when our families have a safe place to call home. We all have a stake in building stronger communities and giving everyone the opportunity to succeed. Housing is the cornerstone of that opportunity. On behalf of the low-income clients of the Oregon Law Center, I urge your support of this bill, to ensure success for tenants, landlords, housing authorities, and communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon.