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Testimony of Chair Deborah Kafoury

Chair Keny-Guyer, members of the committee. I am Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury and I'm happy to be here today to speak in support of HB 4001.

Through a partnership called A Home For Everyone, Multnomah County and the cities of Portland and Gresham have dedicated unprecedented new dollars to housing the homeless and producing new affordable units.

In its latest budget, Multnomah County allocated \$7 million in new funding, including \$5 million for new affordable housing construction -- the first of its kind. The city matched our money and the investments are paying off.

We housed 3,500 people last fiscal year, up 17 percent from the year before. That number will rise to 4,300 people in 2017.

But the reality is that we still don't have enough apartments to go around. Rents have jumped 16 percent countywide. Less than 3 percent of rental units are vacant and this shortage of units is driving up costs for renters and taxpayers who fund our work helping homeless families find housing.

Two years ago we could place a family and provide up to 6 months of rent assistance for an average of \$5,000 per household. These costs now average between \$6,000 and \$8,500 per household and trending upward each month.

Two-bedroom apartments now cost between \$884-1220 per month. To put that into perspective, a full-time worker making minimum wage earns \$1,603 per month before taxes; a parent with two children on TANF receives \$506 per month; and a disabled individual on SSI is receiving \$733.

Because of the high costs of rental housing, a wave of no-cause evictions and vacancy rates near zero, more and more people living on the edge just aren't making it.

Tonight, in Multnomah County, there will be more than 1,800 people sleeping on our sidewalks, and in 2014, 3,000 school-aged children experienced homelessness.

Earlier today I was thrilled to celebrate the opening of a year-round family shelter that will serve 134 people. And this shelter has a no-turn-away policy, meaning that any family that wants help will get it. But an emergency shelter isn't a home.

This housing crisis is threatening the identity of our community as one that prioritizes livability, equity and quality of life. It means more people are spending the nights on a cot, in a car or on their friend's couch for the very first time.

And it is also exposing the deep injustice in our society. Black and Latino families are being hit hardest by soaring rents and we're seeing a spike in homelessness among African Americans.

Last fall Mayor Charlie Hales and I pledged \$30 million to expand shelter capacity, invest heavily in housing placements and new affordable units.

We are finding every dollar that we can to fight this crisis. But we need help. Help from private developers who are experiencing record-breaking growth and profits and help from you, our legislative representatives.

We need help because the scope of the problem in Multnomah County and statewide is staggering. Last month Metro released research showing that the Portland metro region has a shortage of 80,000 units affordable to people making 60 percent of the median family income or less.

Metro estimates that 70 percent of the affordable units in our region are privately owned and unsubsidized. That means that as rents go up across the region, people will continue to be priced out.

In my county, there are 2,500 homeless families waiting for housing assistance right now. Over a third of these households are newly homeless. Over half of these households are working at least part-time but cannot afford move-in costs or rent.

We need to stem the tide of homelessness -- we need the strong renter protections outlined in this bill to provide immediate relief to people living on the edge all across the state.

The fear of eviction is strong: our county home visiting nurses who have worked with low-income families for years say the housing crisis is causing health problems they've never seen. Parents with children suffering from asthma are living with rampant mold, rodents and other poor conditions. They are too terrified to ask for repairs because they fear a no-cause eviction. They are too terrified to even speak out.

One pregnant client, who worked as a manager, was living in her car. She had repeated bladder infections from not having a restroom at night. Despite being pregnant and homeless, she never missed a single prenatal appointment. She even took a rental course to improve her chances of finding housing. She finally found an apartment a few months before the birth. She delivered a healthy baby and while she was still in the hospital recovering from a C-section, she fell behind in her rent. In order to have a place to live, she had to return to work just one week after delivering her child. One week. That is the human cost of an impending eviction.

When you have 30 days to find a new apartment, figure out a how to get to work, register your child in a different school -- update your credit card address information, voter registration, driver's license -- things start to fall through the cracks.

And that's if you are lucky enough to afford the multiple application fees, moving costs, security deposits and the new rent at the next apartment -- for too many families, these obstacles can not be overcome and they end up homeless.

We need the ability to pass local inclusionary housing legislation requiring new developments to include affordable housing.

We also need additional resources for Emergency Housing and State Homeless Assistance to help prevent and end homelessness -- every dollar counts.

The raw impact this crisis is having on families, children and seniors won't go away unless we act today. And our communities -- Bend, West Linn, Grants Pass, Portland and Hillsboro -- are counting on us to do just that.