



Human Solutions

Building Pathways Out of Poverty

March 1, 2017

Dear Chair Keny-Guyer and members of the Human Services and Housing Committee:

I am the Executive Director of Human Solutions, an agency that provides affordable housing and a range of anti-poverty and employment services in support of our mission to build pathways out of poverty for low-income families in East Portland, Gresham and East Multnomah County, one of the most diverse areas of our state. I write to you today to express our urgent support for HB 2004.

Human Solutions has had enormous success over the last decade helping vulnerable families escape the trauma of homelessness and secure stable housing – real homes in which kids thrive and from which parents can seize opportunities to better their lives by completing their education, job training or by securing living wage employment.

The well-documented housing crisis our community is currently experiencing threatens our ongoing success and the success and stability of the families we work with. Human Solutions has some perspective on this housing crisis and its impacts – because we see them every day. We provide eviction prevention services that have helped hundreds of families avoid the trauma of homelessness. We operate two year round homeless shelters that provide safety off the streets for families and women experiencing homelessness. We also partner closely with many private landlords, using rental assistance to support families transitioning from homelessness into stable housing. And Human Solutions is also a landlord – we have developed and now operate over 700 affordable apartments across east Portland and East County – stable homes for hundreds of Oregon's poorest families.

Tonight, roughly 5000 low-income Oregonians, including over 3000 kids, will sleep safely inside - not in our parks and on our streets – as the direct result of what we are able to do – this is success that the State of Oregon has invested in for decades. Thank you for that investment – it supports solutions that are working.

But we all know that there simply aren't enough dollars to keep up with the demand for housing assistance. And there are limits to the assistance even direct financial support can provide in

our current market conditions. When families come in with rent increases of 10, 20 or even 50% - rent assistance programs become ineffective and unsustainable when rents continue to escalate. State and local investments in family stability – a cornerstone of success for every child – are losing critical ground in an unstable housing market. In current markets, we must act quickly to fairly stabilize rents so that our effective rental assistance programs can continue to support family stability. HB 2004 creates the opportunity for local communities to fairly balance the cost of doing the business of being a landlord with the urgent need for families to find a reasonable level of stability and predictability in the monthly cost of their home.

No cause evictions are the single most common reason given by families coming into our shelter for the first time as the primary cause of their homelessness. We have no programs or financial assistance we can offer to prevent the trauma and family chaos that no cause evictions deliver. Our public investments and strong Oregon housing programs are no match for the instability these evictions are causing – for our families, neighborhoods, schools and safety net systems. In a time of crisis, we must explore solutions that get at the structural failures of the rental market itself to produce fairness for families and stable housing for kids. HB 2004 sets out a reasonable solution to address the systemic proliferation of no cause evictions – a primary cause of family homelessness and one that rental assistance programs and our current pace of affordable housing production simply cannot address.

We are raising a generation of kids in our Oregon communities who are experiencing residential displacement and homelessness at record rates. Every indicator we have tells us that when kids are forced to move, change schools, experience homelessness – they lose opportunities to learn, to form lasting bonds of friendship, to maintain self-esteem and the physical and emotional health necessary for child development. This is unconscionable – it is not healthy for our kids or our community. You will hear testimony opposing HB 2004 suggesting it unfairly regulates the landlord tenant relationship. I urge you to ask – is our current system fair to our kids? Is it fair to our communities of color who experience the impacts of homelessness and displacement disproportionately. I submit that our system – as it stands - is inequitable. HB 2004 restores some critical balance to our system by providing to renters a level of housing stability, predictability and fairness that more economically empowered homeowners experience. We cannot make every renter a homeowner – and we needn't. But we can and should deliver a parallel level of predictability and stability for those who lack the economic means to procure a mortgage – which provides for controlled monthly costs and the long term right to reside in the home as long as a set of basic expectations are met.

As the owner of over 700 rental units, Human Solutions understands the challenges and economic risks landlords face every day. We recognize that the relationship between landlords and tenants can transcend the pure economic and legal frameworks in which they must function. We know you will hear and have heard from landlords many anecdotes about what can go wrong in the relationship and how changing the legal framework as HB 2004 makes possible may lead to unintended consequences.

In response, I offer two observations. The first is that – like many owners of publically-financed housing – Human Solutions has successfully operated our hundreds of units of rental housing for years using only a just cause standard and with rents that are stabilized by virtue of the financing agreements we entered into. We make it work - even with occasional consequences not anticipated by our regulatory and financing agreements. More importantly, it works well for the families who call our apartments home – providing years of stable, secure housing. And when things do go wrong – we have and use available remedies.

As a second response to concerns about unintended consequences, I offer a question – are the consequences of our current system - including record levels of family homelessness and overflowing shelters - truly acceptable? Do the consequences of our current framework - in which families regularly experience ouster from their homes without cause or reason and sudden and extreme rent increases that bear no relationship to the cost of providing their housing – honor our best intentions?

Thank you for your efforts to improve the lives of Oregon’s families.

Sincerely,

Andy Miller, Executive Director

Human Solutions