



**Urban League**  
of Portland

March 18, 2020

Written Testimony Submitted on Behalf of Nkenge Harmon Johnson,  
President and CEO, Urban League of Portland

To Co-Chairs Roblan and Holvey and Members of the Committee,

Founded in 1945 as an affiliate of the National Urban League, the Urban League of Portland is a nonprofit community-based organization headquartered in North Portland. Our mission is to empower African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, and economic security. We are one of the oldest and largest civil rights and service organizations in the area, and our work reaches thousands of Oregonians each year.

While all communities in Oregon will be impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Black communities in our state face unique hurdles to withstanding and recovering from the effects of the coronavirus and the economic fallout, due to historic- and ongoing systemic racism. After the Great Recession, Black households have roughly 7% of the wealth of white households, leaving them less-equipped with safety nets to help weather this storm. Unemployment and food insecurity rates are roughly double for African Americans compared to white families. Also, Black workers are more likely to be in low-wage, low-benefit jobs than their peers of other racial groups. The ongoing racial disparities in health outcomes are well-documented, too. Observing past crises in our nation, it's clear the Black community will feel the impact more than any other group. Because of this, we must be swift and proactive in our response. The Urban League stands ready and is doing so now. We hope the state will join us.

We are grateful for the leadership at the state and local levels; taking action through emergency declarations and preventative measures to help curb the spread of the virus. As our communities are rapidly adapting to the measures, we must address the emerging needs for our economic security and mitigate effects long-time harm.

As you consider steps to address this state of emergency, please prioritize policies that will benefit communities already most in need. Specifically:

- Pass an emergency rent forgiveness order for all workers whose income stream is impacted by COVID-19 through September 2020, or provide sufficient rental assistance to replace lost income, and reassess monthly as the situation evolves.
- Place a temporary moratorium on evictions for non-payment, and any evictions effecting elders and Oregonians with underlying health conditions.
- Provide financial support for non-profit housing providers who rely on rent payments, and ensure their critical services remain in operation.
- Infuse state resources for temporary housing, especially housing to protect unsheltered individuals or those living in shelters.
- Allow TANF, WIC, OHP and other benefits programs to move to an online, by phone, or electronic verification system. Release requirements for recipients to appear in-person during this pandemic in order to maintain or obtain benefits.

- Streamline unemployment payments for those laid off after the social distancing orders went into effect.
- Ensure the voices of all workers are heard, by including nonprofit, and especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color-led organizations when convening discussions with business leaders about economic relief and financial support for businesses. Remember, the Urban League employees nearly 50 full-time employees, who live in Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, Marion, and Clark Counties. We also contract with vendors from across the state.
- Similar to actions taken in other states, release people being held for non-violent offenses and those awaiting trial to reduce exposure for people in custody and those working in these facilities.
- Ensure that healthcare facilities located within underserved communities are provided the resources they need, and support access to safe transportation.

Thank you for your consideration. The Urban League looks forward to continuing to work with you on these policy solutions to serve our communities.