

To the Joint Special Committee on Coronavirus Response (JSCCR),

My name is Ajna Gabriella. I have lived in Portland for almost 8 years. I have spent most of my time in Portland working in the foodservice industry, and this year, I left my management position at a cafe job to pursue my passion as an astrologer through freelance work and self-employment.

Most of my friends, my housemate, and my partner have been laid off or had their hours severely cut in the last week. Even my friends who have been laid off are having trouble filing for unemployment because they were working multiple part-time gigs. Many of my regular clients for astrology work have had to cancel sessions and discontinue working together because they no longer have any disposable income. Most people in their twenties don't have much of any savings.

I am terrified for my own and all other working-class folks' financial future in this pandemic, and the number one stress on my and my loved-one's minds is RENT. Even before the economy started to plummet, rent has been a struggle for Portlanders. I know many people working multiple jobs who are still stressed out about the cost of living. Now, with income gone or significantly lower, rent. Feels. Impossible.

I am aware that there is a moratorium on evictions right now, and I am familiar with the policy in place that will allow renters to defer rent and pay it back over a sixth month period after the city and county state of emergencies end. THIS IS NOT ENOUGH. It doesn't look like this virus will go away in a matter of weeks or even months. And Portland's already existing housing crisis is only getting worse through this.

Please, listen. I have tried to remain as informed about this as possible. I am aware that according to Oregon law, total rent control is technically out of the state's jurisdiction. But there has to be a way to not force renters and the working class into deeper debt because of this. We can't let the bulk of this crisis fall on the shoulders of the people who are already most burdened in society, the people who are already struggling to stay afloat. THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY for radical restructuring, for lifting up the poor, the working-class, and the middle class.

Isn't it true that county and state agencies have the ability to impose temporary rent control in the event of a natural or person-made disaster that "materially eliminates a significant portion of the rental housing supply?" Is that applicable here at all? We need to get creative. 6 months to pay back rent feels impossible. Having to accrue more debt -- on top of credit cards, on top of student loans, on top of bills . . . the weight of it feels so heavy and unbearable I am afraid for what it would do to people. I am afraid of the type of despair and frustration brewing.

If we were able to find a way to freeze rent, even for a month, with no debt accrued in the process-- I believe it could make a world of a difference in keeping Portland functioning. People could calm down, take care of themselves and each other, feed themselves properly, to support the businesses that remain open. What money is available could actually be circulated in the community. For those that don't have the money, they could have more time to figure something out without the fear of later eviction due to debt that can't be paid. I understand that landlords have families too, and need their income. Is there a way to freeze their bills? To make THEM repay the government or some other entity the rent money at a later date?

I don't have clear or brilliant solutions, but I need y'all to know that there are so many people who can't pay rent, who can't afford more debt, and who want real change in this city, this state, and this country to uplift those at the very bottom. If our poor and working-class are empowered, we can really meet this crisis TOGETHER, unified.

Please center non-traditional and freelance workers like me in your decision making. Please center service industry workers in your decision making. Please center the poor in your decision making. Please center the people who were struggling before this crisis, who are now out of options and feeling like their future will never look the same.

There is no “going back to normal.” We need to move forward with expanded vision and open hearts to building new systems that ensure basic human rights -- shelter, water, food, and healthcare available to all. No matter what. That must be our priority.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this. I appreciate all of the hard work y’all are doing to move forward. Thank you for your service. May we all grow from this.

Sincerely,
Ajna Gabriella

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may this communication aid in bringing to life our highest intentions