

To: Chair Fagan, Co-Chair Girod and Members of the Senate Housing Committee

Re: Support for SB 608, Tenant Protections

My name is Charlie Peirson. I'm a public defender from Portland. I'm here to urge you to support for SB 608's protections against unjust eviction and against the continued threat of economic displacement for all of Oregon's renters.

I'm a renter and I could surely add my voice to the chorus of renters whose future in their homes is uncertain. But I'm a public defender, so instead, I want to use this time to advocate for my clients. Specifically, I want to share with you about the relationship between housing instability and involvement in the criminal justice system.

First, getting evicted or priced out of your home doesn't always mean police contact or criminal charges. That said, the Oregonian reported that in 2017, the 3% of Portland residents without houses accounted for 52% of arrests and 84% of those arrests were for nonviolent offenses. I represent hundreds of people each year who have no stable, legal place to sleep, bathe, or live their lives as we do behind closed doors. The loss of housing disrupts the basic patterns of a healthy, prosocial life, and can turn everyday private struggles into public problems.

Homeless people get arrested for trespassing, often because of where they sleep or because they got on public transportation without fare too many times. They get arrested for drinking in parks or for having an open beer can on a sidewalk, shouting in public, or putting up a tent in the wrong place. "Tumultuous behavior," shoplifting, and shoving matches. I've seen people arrested for protecting their property, for having the drugs they take to stay awake at night, and for answering nature's call. They get arrested for being a nuisance. I recently heard a Portland police officer say that if they come talk to a person three times "you're getting arrested."

Most of my homeless clients eventually miss a court date. They oversleep. They get injured, they get sick, they have loved ones whose welfare comes first. Often, the safest place they can sleep is far from the courthouse. Court documents get stolen, lost, or ruined by rain. A missed court date means another arrest. The average stay, the Sheriff says, is 10 to 15 days.

Homeless people get arrested for things that wouldn't happen if they had a home. They get arrested for things they'd have a right to do in their own home. They get arrested because they are messy and their messes are upsetting. They make us uncomfortable.

A home is more than just a legal place to sleep. It's a refuge. It's a place where we can keep ourselves and our lives in order and a place where we can shut the door when we need to be messy. Home is where we recover. To put it simply, housing instability creates petty crimes and unnecessary arrests and makes it harder to move through the criminal justice system smoothly.

Please act now to support SB 608. Protect Oregon's renters against unfair evictions and help maintain stability. It doesn't address every problem we have with housing, but anything that we can do to keep vulnerable and at-risk families in their homes is absolutely worth doing.