

House Committee on Human Services and Housing
February 25, 2019
Chair, Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer

Testimony in Support of HB 2662
Jeff Carr, CEO, Albertina Kerr

Chair Keny-Guyer, and members of the Committee, my name is Jeff Carr and I am the CEO of Albertina Kerr, one of the largest and oldest human service organizations in the State of Oregon and I'm here to speak in support of HB 2662. For over 112 years we have cared for vulnerable Oregonians and today our more than 750 employees care for adults and children with intellectual and developmental disabilities and mental health challenges. Our direct care workers are the backbone of Oregon's social safety net that ensures our most vulnerable citizens receive the care and support they need to lead self-determined lives and reach their full potential.

Unfortunately, that social safety net is at risk, as many of these people who care for our vulnerable citizens are becoming economically vulnerable themselves. When I arrived at Albertina Kerr 2.5 years ago as CEO, I discovered six weeks into my tenure that we had a full-time employee and her five kids that were living in a tent in Hillsboro. While we found temporary housing, and then permanent housing for she and her kids, I learned she was not the only employee who was housing insecure. Each month when I facilitate our new employee orientation I hear new stories of people who are living in their cars or couch surfing, unable to find an affordable place to live, while trying to manage the stress that is inherent in the work they do in caring for others every single day. And while we have established an employee emergency fund to help struggling employees, and raised wages for our direct care workers 18% over the last two years, they continue to fall further behind as the gap between wages needed to afford rent and the number of affordable units available to rent grows each year.

I know our housing crisis is no secret to any of you, and we certainly need to address the chronic homelessness in many of our communities, but we also need to begin to address the housing insecurity of our direct care workers or our entire social safety net may crumble within a few years. Albertina Kerr is in the process of developing 120 units of workforce housing on our 10-acre campus in Gresham. Our hope is that this will provide an affordable option for not only our direct care workers, but for others in our community who are providing life-giving care, and that it will be the first of a network of developments to support this segment of our workforce.

As part of our plan we are hoping to utilize 4% LIHTC and HB 2662 would create a preference policy that targets low-wage direct care workers in specific projects like the one Albertina Kerr is building. The federal tax credit law allows for preferences for veterans, homeless individuals who have chronic mental illness, and even artists. We have a preference policy here in Oregon for agricultural workers and the intent of HB 2662 is to mimic the preference policies for these groups for direct care workers.

I urge you to support HB 2662, as we work with Representative Keny-Guyer to amend HB 2662 to ensure this goal is met and hopefully create a model that other non-profit organizations can replicate to increase the availability of housing that provides direct care workers with an affordable housing option that gives them the stability they need to focus on providing the quality care that our vulnerable citizens deserve.

Some have suggested that rather than build housing for our employees and other direct care workers, that we just increase the wages of our employees. But that's a false choice. It's not a question of either or, but both and. We must increase wages and we must build more affordable housing for this important sector of our economy. HB 2662 moves us closer towards that goal.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today and I look forward to working with your committee going forward.