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House Committee on Human Services and Housing Testimony in Support of HB 4002 February 5, 2020

Chair Keny-Guyer and Members of the Committee:

My name is Becky Straus and I am a Staff Attorney with the Oregon Law Center (OLC). OLC is a non-profit law firm whose mission is to achieve justice for low-income communities of Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. Thank you for the opportunity to express OLC's support of HB 4002, which is the first step in an important conversation about the development of an Oregon long-term rental assistance program.

One of the most important issues in the lives of OLC's clients across the state is the challenge to find and maintain safe, stable, affordable housing. Housing is about much more than a roof over one's head; it is about opportunity, stability, and health. Without stable housing, it is difficult or impossible for families to hold down a job, keep children in school, access neighborhood amenities, and stay healthy.

Statewide, Oregon's population is growing¹ and yet housing production lags behind.² The cost of housing is high while incomes and vacancy rates remain low. The result is a sharp increase³ in recent years in the number of Oregonians experiencing homelessness, including an increase in the number of school children without the stability of home.⁴ Families living just on the brink of homelessness do so with extreme rent burdens. One in four renters in our state is paying more than 50 percent of income in rent. For households with extremely low incomes, that number jumps to three out of four households paying more than 50 percent of income on rent. When tenants pay more than half their income towards rent, they do not have enough money left over to support themselves and their families.

We can solve these problems. In directing a study about an Oregon long-term rent assistance program, HB 4002 takes an important step toward doing so. Long-term rent assistance is an effective strategy to prevent homelessness and provide an opportunity for people with low incomes to access stability. At the federal level, it is a proven anti-homelessness tool with

¹ Certified Population Estimates (July 1, 2019), Portland State University Population Research Center.

https://www.pdx.edu/prc/sites/www.pdx.edu/prc/files/Certified%20Population%20Estimates_%202012_15_2019.pdf

² Oregon Statewide Housing Plan 2018

³ Oregon Homelessness Point in Time Count 2019

⁴ Oregon Department of Education Homeless Student Data. https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/esca/mckinney-vento/pages/default.aspx?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

positive ripple effects on the needs for foster care placements, rates of alcohol dependence and psychological distress, among other hardships.⁵ Existing federal resources, however, are insufficient to meet the need. In 2018, approximately 47,000 households in Oregon received rent assistance through federal tenant-based or project-based vouchers. These federal programs served one in four households that are eligible for these subsidies.

The Legislature needs to step in with a dedicated revenue source to adequately and permanently fund a long-term rental assistance program in Oregon. We support HB 4002 as a first step to evaluate the feasibility of such a program.

We need to continue to advance housing solutions for people with the lowest incomes in our communities and to work across the continuum of needs. We thank you for considering this important proposal and urge your support.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions that you may have. Thank you.

⁵ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities testimony before Congress regarding Housing Choice Voucher Program, April 2018. <https://www.cbpp.org/housing/housing-choice-voucher-program-oversight-and-review-of-legislative-proposals>