



HOUSING SENIORS | CREATING HOPE | PILOTING CHANGE

February 11, 2021

Members of the Senate Committee on Housing and Development
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

RE: SB 291-4

Chair Jama and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor of SB 291-4 on behalf of Northwest Pilot Project.

Northwest Pilot Project is a nonprofit social service agency that serves people aged 55 and older experiencing housing instability and homelessness in Multnomah County. We work to end homelessness for low income seniors, who are among the fastest growing segment of the population experiencing homelessness.

Due to structural racism, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities are disproportionately represented among the many vulnerable seniors we serve. We know this overrepresentation is a symptom of racial housing inequality. Every day, homeless service providers like us confront the long-term effects of profound injustices and systematic racism in public policy that have created racial disparities in housing opportunity, income and employment access, health care access, and importantly, contact with our criminal justice system.

Our housing stabilization services include case management for households experiencing prolonged homelessness, and we provide extra support to participants who have past convictions as they are likely to face housing application denials despite their other qualifications as tenants.

Tenant selection policies play a significant role in housing access for our most vulnerable clients. Despite the fact that there is no proven relationship between an individual's conviction history and their success as a tenant, landlords can and often do reject applicants on the basis of convictions without consideration for the individual's circumstances or changes made. In addition, lack of prompt notification to applicants about the denial reason and lack of clear, accessible process to appeal a denial can pose insurmountable challenges for applicants who are already experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

Over the years, requests to our agency for assistance have increased and the landscape of affordable, low barrier housing in our area has become more and more limited. Our response has been to prioritize more staff time to accompany clients through the entire application

process. This work consists of working with a client to better understand their housing barriers, identify resources and supports to ensure they can be successful in their future housing, gathering documentation, and preparing for the high likelihood that we will need to submit an appeal letter or Reasonable Accommodation request to the landlord upon denial.

I know from personal experience that there is something deeply encouraging about receiving notification that a client's housing application denial was overturned, and that they can begin to plan their move. But during my time as a case manager, I also felt astonished at the often unnecessary challenges that renters with past convictions face. At one point, I spent days appealing a denial for someone who was living in his car, whose most recent conviction took place 17 years prior to applying. Another time, I repeated the process for an individual who was living in a tent on a friend's property, whose only conviction, a drug possession felony, took place one year before first-time simple drug possession was reduced to a misdemeanor in the state of Oregon. Had her conviction taken place a year later, her application would not have been flagged for automatic denial by the landlord. Knowing the amount of skill and effort it took for these individuals to be successfully housed, I can only guess at how many others remain unhoused because of what can be an overwhelming, uphill battle for qualified tenants to obtain safe and affordable housing.

The changes proposed in SB 291-4 will make a significant impact on the lives of Oregonians by reducing the hurdles described above. The requirement for landlords to conduct an individualized assessment of an applicant's criminal history as well as other key pieces of this bill will be a step forward in providing housing opportunity and stability to countless housing applicants impacted by the criminal justice system, and will likely allow many more individuals to be approved by a landlord without needing the help of a housing case manager to be successful.

On behalf of Northwest Pilot Project, I want to thank the Governor's Racial Justice Council for their work on this bill. I strongly urge this committee to support of SB 291-4 and thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Marisa Espinoza
Public Policy Coordinator
Northwest Pilot Project