



Standing for dignity in the workplace

Testimony in Support of SB 611
March 27, 2023

Dear Chair Jama, Vice-Chair Anderson, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of SB 611. My name is Kate Suisman and I am an attorney at the Northwest Workers' Justice Project (NWJP). We represent workers in low-wage jobs when bad things happen to them at work, like when they are not paid or are discriminated against for being in a protected class or are retaliated against for speaking up. Finally, we engage in policy advocacy and try to bring the important perspectives of workers in low-wage jobs and immigrant workers to these policy discussions.

We strongly encourage you to pass SB 611 as a critical homelessness prevention strategy, to protect workers, seniors, families, individuals and communities across the state from extreme rent increases and displacement.

Many of our clients at the NWJP have little or no savings due to the low-wages paid in many important sectors of the Oregon economy, such as janitorial, farm work and food processing. One missed paycheck can cause someone to lose their housing. Many of our clients have been wrongfully fired because they were part of a protected class, or because they spoke up at work. This leaves workers in an especially vulnerable position when it comes to housing, exacerbated by rising rent costs in Oregon.

In 2019-2020, NWJP did a survey of our clients and potential clients about their housing security. We completed 201 comprehensive housing surveys. Our initial analysis confirmed what we expected: about half of those polled who experienced workplace issues, such as wage theft or discrimination, then experienced housing instability. **Of the people surveyed who experienced a workplace issue, 10% lost their housing, with 9% becoming homeless as a result. An additional 39% of respondents reported being at risk of losing their housing as a result of the workplace issues.** The link between having your rights violated at work and losing your housing is an intuitive one, and our data backs this up.

SB 611 is an action that the legislature can take now to have an immediate impact on our state's housing crisis as we also work on the longer term solutions of increasing supply and providing support to rehouse our currently homeless neighbors.

The rent increase reports from across Oregon show the great need for SB 611. Studies show that just a \$100 increase in median rents in a community is tied to a 9% increase in homelessness in that community. At a time when Oregon is experiencing some of the highest rates of homelessness in the nation, we cannot afford to let rent spikes go unchecked. A reasonable rent limit will help prevent high-rent home loss and prevent our state's homeless crisis from getting worse just as we are all pulling together to treat it as the emergency that it is. The legislature did the right thing in passing the first rent limit in 2019 but as we have all learned now, the limit did not account for runaway inflation.

We know these extreme rent increases are not isolated incidents. There are so many that the results are playing out in eviction court and in media headlines. More than 86% of all eviction filings are due to unaffordable rent. This reasonable proposal prevents extreme rent increases and displacements, while allowing landlords to take inflation into account and preserving the ability to reset rents to market rates in between tenancies.

The clients we represent at NWJP would greatly benefit from SB 611's protections against extreme rent increases. The housing protections SB 611 offers can permit a worker facing adverse employment situations to pursue justice without having the added burden of dealing with potential eviction or homelessness due to rent and housing insecurity. We know the importance of ensuring that everyone in Oregon has a fair chance for decent housing and SB 611 will help protect those most vulnerable to unmanageable rent hikes.

Oregon's housing emergency goes beyond lack of supply and the number of people living without homes or shelter. We have a rental emergency as well, with tenants living just one rent increase notice away from displacement and possible homelessness. Without SB 611 to stop runaway and extreme rent increases, we will continue to see people displaced onto the streets more quickly than we can rehouse people. Without passage of SB 611, Oregon's success in addressing the housing crisis is at grave risk.

Please pass SB 611 as soon as possible. Thank you very much.