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To: Senate Committee on Housing and Development
From: Sybil Hebb, Oregon Law Center
Date: February 8th, 2024
Re: SB 1537

Dear Chair Jama, Vice-Chair Anderson, and members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in strong support of SB 1537, which will establish critically important new housing production tools and create a coordinated state implementation structure for these tools to maximize housing production outcomes.

Across the state — from big and mid-size cities to small, rural towns — Oregonians are straining under the pressure of an increasingly unaffordable, and unavailable, housing market. We need more housing of all types, but especially more affordable housing, that is accessible to people with low and moderate incomes. There is no more critical issue facing our state and we must act boldly, and without delay, to make up for decades of underbuilding. SB 1537 is well-considered and provides a critical framework for bold action.

The Oregon Law Center (OLC) is a state-wide 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. Helping families maintain safe, stable housing is a critical part of our work. 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.

Decades of underbuilding have left Oregon with a severe housing shortage that is driving up rents, home prices, and worsening our homelessness crisis. The state is currently behind by 140,000 housing units and needs to produce over 440,000 units in the next 20 years to keep pace with demand. As a result of this shortage, Oregon has some of the most rent-burdened renters in the nation, and some of the highest rates of homelessness in the nation.

The majority of OLC's client community is rent burdened – one emergency away from homelessness – or houseless themselves, living either doubled-up or in shelter, or living outside without adequate shelter. Homelessness and the lack of stable, safe housing are perhaps the single most important issues to our client communities, in urban and rural areas across the state. In our work, we see a direct correlation between the lack of housing supply and high rents, and between rent increases and evictions, and between evictions and homelessness.

Oregon cannot solve its homelessness crisis without also addressing its housing shortage. See [Homelessness is a Housing Problem](#), by Gregg Colburn and Clayton Page Aldern (2022) (Colburn is a professor of housing policy at the University of Washington and Aldern is a data scientist in Seattle). “[The authors] show convincingly that rents and rental vacancy rates are key drivers of city-to-city variation in rates of homelessness.”



Oregon Law Center

WORKING TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE JUSTICE FOR LOW INCOME OREGONIANS

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The tools provided by SB 1537, in addition to the resource investments, will provide more opportunity for affordable housing developers to create more safe and stable housing units accessible to low and moderate income households. We are grateful to the Governor, her team, and all stakeholders who have collaborated to bring this bill forward to set a bold vision for prioritizing solutions to our most pressing state challenges.

Housing stability is a key strategy for reducing intergenerational poverty and increasing economic mobility for OLC's clients, and we urge your support for SB 1537 as a step towards accomplishing this vision.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and for your work on behalf of Oregonians.

Sincerely,
Sybil Hebb

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