

Chair Gelser, Vice Chair Olsen, and Members of the Committee:

I am a social worker and an organizer for the Solidarity Alliance of Social Services, or SASS for short. SASS is a coalition of behavioral health and social service providers in the Portland Metro Area.

Until recently, I worked as a mental health therapist at a Portland area community mental health nonprofit. I provided individual and group therapy as well as case management services to adolescents with serious and persistent mental illness. All of my clients were funded by the Oregon Health Plan and came from low opportunity environments, at best. Many had a dual mental health and addictions diagnosis, and many more presented with the far reaching impacts of intergenerational trauma.

The young people I worked with needed a rock. They needed a consistent, empathetic presence. They needed critical case management services in order to transition to independence. They needed skills training, education around harm reduction, nurturing guidance and other essential tools to keep themselves safe. They needed mentorship and modeling to understand that adulthood can look different than it had in the lives of the other adults they'd known.

If you think that sounds like a long list of items to accomplish in one 60-minute appointment, you're right. What I can say is that the bulk of my time with clients was spent addressing their most basic need, housing. The vast majority of my clients were marginally housed, if not homeless.

I worked with one 19 year old African American man who I will refer to as "D". D was in a program for early onset psychosis. Throughout the time that I knew him, he vacillated between couch surfing and living on the streets following a no cause eviction from which he never fully recovered. Without his housing, his symptoms significantly worsened. He had near constant contact with the police and was unable to engage in the basics of self care. He regularly presented in crisis at our offices due to an increase in paranoia coupled with simply having nowhere else to go. Myself and my team were sometimes able to help him access respite housing services, but it seemed like we were putting Band-Aids on bullet wounds.

In spite of these obstacles, D had so many strengths. He was intelligent, charismatic and a talented musician. I often wondered what kind of therapeutic work could have been possible had it not been for his perpetual housing crisis. I wondered what his life might have looked like and what he could have accomplished.

So much suffering can be avoided if there were protections in place to make the housing of our community's most vulnerable populations more secure.

While D's circumstances are unique, the barriers he faces are not uncommon. The 4 in 10 Oregon households that are renters need protection from eviction without cause and extreme

and sudden rent increases. We must act now. We cannot build our way out of this problem. Please support HB 2004A to provide fairness and stability for the millions of Oregonians who are renters.

Thank you for your attention to this very important matter,

Lielah Leighton, MSW