



February 11, 2021

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

Dear Chair Jama, Vice-Chair Linthicum, Members of the Committee:

I write to you on behalf of Home Forward, a Public Housing Authority (PHA) and largest provider of affordable housing in the state of Oregon. Home Forward serves more than 17,500 people earning low-incomes in Multnomah County by providing affordable housing and administering rent assistance. We also provide various supportive services to Home Forward residents and participants.

Home Forward is committed to advancing racial equity and we know that means we need to change. One aspect of this work to change is reviewing all of our policies with a racial equity framework and changing them accordingly. We started our agency-wide policy review with our criminal screening policy because we know that blanket bans on criminal history likely have racially disparate impacts and perpetuate the harm caused by systemic racism in the criminal justice system.

The impact of systemic racism on the criminal justice involvement of people of color, especially Black men, cannot be overstated. Despite no evidence to support differences in criminal behavior, people of color experience disproportionate rates of arrest, conviction, and incarceration. For example:

- Black/African American men are 6.4 times more likely than white men to be incarcerated.
- Latinx men are 2.6 times more likely than white men to be incarcerated.
- Black/African American women are 2.9 times more likely than white women to be incarcerated.

In 2016, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released guidance stating that: "...criminal history-based restrictions on access to housing are likely disproportionately to burden African Americans and Hispanics" and are therefore likely, without justification, to violate the Fair Housing Act.

In an effort to reduce racial disparities and advance racial equity, we are in the process of significantly reducing the number of crimes we consider, and the period of time that we will consider a crime after someone has been convicted to reduce racial disparities. If we do consider a conviction, we will always perform an individual assessment considering at least the factors included in this bill.

Everyone deserves a place to call home and we take the responsibility of keeping the communities we serve safe. At a minimum, people who have served their time deserve the dignity of having their unique circumstances taken into consideration before being denied something as foundational to individual and community prosperity as housing.

Home Forward supports the spirit of this bill and we appreciate the Governor's racial justice committee for developing this proposal. We recommend that the Governor's office and committee consider the following changes:

- Clarify that consideration of arrest is prohibited in all cases. The Supreme Court has recognized that arrest has little if any value in showing that a person has engaged in misconduct. For this reason, arrests should not be considered.
- Consider reasonable look back periods: Home Forward has adopted reasonable look back periods because the more time has passed since someone has been convicted of a crime, the less likely they are to be convicted of another crime. People should not be denied housing forever because of a crime they committed years ago if they do not pose a risk to the health and safety of their neighbors.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on SB291 (-4 amendments) today. Please contact Taylor Smiley Wolfe, Director of Policy and Planning, Home Forward at 503-957-8760 or taylor.smileywolfe@homeforward.org regarding these comments.

Sincerely,

Taylor Smiley Wolfe
Director of Policy and Planning
Home Forward