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Public Hearing before the Senate Housing and Development Committee
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In Support of SB 1536 with Dash One Amendment – Emergency Heat Relief for Renters

Chair Jama, Vice-Chair Anderson, and members of the committee:

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center, please accept this testimony in support of SB 1536 with the Dash One amendment. Passage of this bill will help keep Oregon renters safe during periods of excessive and dangerous heat. We greatly appreciate the work and leadership of Chair Jama and community advocates in bringing this bill forward.

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 and affordable 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 safe, stable and affordable housing, it is difficult or impossible for families to hold down a job, keep children in school, access neighborhood amenities, and stay safe and healthy.

In recent years, extreme heat has threatened the lives of many of our friends and neighbors across the state. During the 2021 heat dome, over the course of 5 devastating days, at least 96 Oregonians died as a result of hyperthermia.¹ Studies showed that the vast majority of people who lost their lives were older, lived alone, and had no access to air conditioning.² More than half of those who died were low-income renters living in apartments or multifamily units. Mobile home park residents were also significantly over-represented among deaths.³

In high temperatures, access to cooling is clearly a matter of life and death. As our state has grappled with an increasing number of extreme heat events, it is incumbent upon policy makers to ensure that vulnerable communities have access to air conditioned or cooled spaces to ensure survival. Under current law, many low-income renters cannot afford or do not have the right to install air conditioners or other cooling devices in their rental units. These renters are at risk of injury or death during oncoming heat waves if we do not act quickly to ensure access to cooling.

¹ <https://www.opb.org/article/2021/08/06/oregon-june-heat-wave-deaths-names-revealed-medical-examiner/>

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.opb.org/article/2021/07/13/portland-oregon-heat-wave-deaths-air-conditioning/>

SB 1536-1 will protect the public health and safety of our communities during heat waves by:

- Ensuring that renters have reasonable rights to install cooling devices in their rental units, while maintaining building safety and providing liability protections for landlords;
- Providing alternative compliance methods for landlords whose buildings cannot sustain energy loads of individual cooling devices for all tenants, by providing access to cooling centers during extreme heat waves;
- Providing funding for landlords for the purpose of increasing access to cooling;
- Providing standards for new construction and in renovations of current units involving replacement of heating systems to ensure access to cooling in future rental units;
- Providing funding for the construction of extreme weather public shelters.

The proponents and sponsors of this proposal have done remarkable work rising to respond to the tragedy of last summer, when so many Oregonians lost their lives due to heat exhaustion. SB 1536-1 is a well-crafted, reasonable, and comprehensive policy solution that addresses the needs of tenants as well as landlords. Quite simply, passage of this bill will save lives. On behalf of the Oregon Law Center and our clients, we are grateful for the leadership of the bill's proponents and urge prompt passage of SB 1536-1.

Thank you for your time and for your dedication to Oregonians.