

RABBI FORA

Good Afternoon Committee Members, Vice Chairs, and Chair

Buenas tardes a los miembros del comite, vice presidentes y presidente

My name is Rabbi Fora and I'm here to speak in support of SB 599. Since the age of 17, I have experienced periods of housing instability. This lived experience inspired me to advocate for housing justice. While serving on the Human Rights Commission for the City of Austin, I lobbied for a housing-first, motel model shelter. That program was eventually instituted and while it has faced setbacks, it also made real differences in the lives of Austinites.

When I moved to Portland, I was initially hired as a case manager for a similar motel program. It was in that role where I became familiar with the specific roadblocks faced by other folks. See, my lived experience was solely about money. And I knew plenty of folks who had more predictable barriers: losing a job or a loved one, becoming ill for a long period of time, landlord decides to sell without notice, an unbearable rent increase, and the like. But because of my privileges, my learning curve in this new position was just how burdensome documentation was for most folks.

The obvious affected population with these barriers is immigrants, a point I'll return to in a moment. But I'd like to tell you about a client of mine who was a citizen. He had done everything "correct" according to society. He worked a long-term job. He had savings. He only occasionally imbibed a beer or two with another client at the Chinese restaurant across the way. You might be wondering, how the hell did he end up in a shelter?

See, that long-term job he was working? It was under the table. Because of this, he didn't have any social security credits despite being near retirement age. When COVID shut that job down, he wasn't eligible for unemployment. Without steady income, despite having savings, it started to dwindle fast. He was forced to not renew his informal lease. But, he quickly found a job on the books. He was doing well overall. But when it came time to begin a new, formal lease, he found a new barrier.

He was born overseas to American parents on American soil. He needed a new copy of his consulate birth certificate in order to prove his identity. I don't know how many of you have ever tried to request a consular birth certificate during a global pandemic, but I can tell you it isn't as simple as filling out a few forms.

We did eventually house him. However, he spent a little over two years in the shelter housing system. According to some estimates, it cost anywhere between \$9,000-\$15,000 per year per person for these services. We potentially spent \$30,000 as a society to get this man one sheet of paper. Now imagine how much more difficult it is with immigration or naturalization paperwork.

CONTACT

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It's no secret we're in a housing crisis. The political solution for too long has simply been to throw more money at the problem. Don't get me wrong, money helps. It is a worthy investment to get folks back on their feet so they can feel accomplished and socially integrated. But money can only do so much. By removing roadblocks such as these, we can create more efficiency.

My final thoughts are these. I would be remiss as a rabbi not to tie this to Passover. In a little more than a month, Jewish folks will be celebrating our liberation from oppression. When I celebrate this holiday, I am often reminded of Exodus 22:21 "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Many consider it a *mitzvah*, or holy commandment, to invite non-Jewish people to passover seder.

For all these reasons, and so many more, I strongly encourage you to vote in favor of SB 599.

Sincerely,



CONTACT

THEMSFORA@PROTON.ME | 971-917-6268 | [LINKTR.EE/RAVFORA](https://linktr.ee/RAVFORA)