



HOUSING SENIORS | CREATING HOPE | PILOTING CHANGE

Oregon State Legislature

Senate Committee on Housing and Development

Re: Support for SB1523

Dear Chair Pham, Vice-Chair Anderson, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Celine Mazoyer, and I am writing on behalf of Northwest Pilot Projects and the elderly clients we serve in support of SB 1523, which is designed to bridge the digital divide for tenants and remove electronic barriers to housing.

I've completed online applications with clients myself and also supported my team of housing case managers in doing the same. We assist older adults who are experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness with housing navigation. As a result, we work with many market rate and subsidized apartment buildings that use web based applications (tenant portals). While we appreciate some of the benefits of digital applications, it's important to note that relying solely on this method is causing a significant amount of people to be excluded from housing opportunities. Those people tend to be some of our most vulnerable community members, many of whom are seniors who either don't know how to use technology, don't have access to the technology needed to apply due to the cost or inability to reliably charge devices while homeless, and/or have disabilities that make navigating these platforms difficult.

The websites can often be so glitchy that my team of experienced and tech savvy case managers struggle to navigate these portals. In order, to apply a client must have an email address and phone number which in and of itself can be challenging to setup. They then have to create a tenant portal account, which asks them to verify their identity via emails and text messages. This is another hurdle if the client can't access these due to limited texting data or forgetting email logins.

Oftentimes, each building requires that you create a new portal specifically for their application, but if you've already created a portal for another building on that same website, then it can become extremely difficult to create a new one because it might flag your email or phone number as suspicious. The path to navigating around this requires knowledge that even many technologically-abled people might not know about.

Several months ago some subsidized buildings opened their waitlists for a very short window of time and many of our staff struggled to get clients on those waitlists due to problems with the website. When this happens, applicants frequently have no option to apply because they can't fix the website and also don't have another way to submit their paperwork when a paper application is not accepted. These circumstances hampered our organization's ability to get clients on the waitlists.

We've also had several subsidized buildings lose a significant portion of their waitlist due to website issues and have no way to recreate their lists due to entire applications going missing and they didn't have physical files to look back on. This is extremely frustrating when many people have been on waitlists for months or years and can't even be notified that they need to reapply because there's no way to know who was on the list. This impacted many of our clients who were over 65 years since those buildings had age specific age requirements.

Additionally, when applying via website there's a lack of ability to share relevant nuanced information about clients such as when an address that's being disclosed is just for mail - and not an address they live at- so therefore can't provide as a reference. Also, clients with Section 8 vouchers that will cover the rent can sometimes be denied from housing due to the fact that they don't meet the income criteria at first glance and are weeded out by the algorithms despite the fact that the voucher will cover the rent.

These are just some of the perspectives of our clients and case managers but please keep in mind that there are hundreds of people in our communities who are trying to navigate our housing systems without social workers or other supports helping them. For all of these reasons, we urge your strong support of this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and for your service to our Oregon community.

Sincerely,

Celine Mazoyer