



Housing security and its connections to sexual and domestic violence prevention (part 1 of 2)

ASHLEIGH: First of all Michelle and Sybil welcome! Thank you so much for joining us for this conversation and I think it would be great to just start with if you both could give a little bit of background about your organizations. I know Michelle, you're with the Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force and Sybil, you are with the Oregon Law Center so if you could just give our listeners just a little background about your organizations.

MICHELE: Great, thank you so much Ashleigh and Tori, for inviting us to chat today. This is Michele with the Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force. And we are a statewide private non-profit organization, we have over a hundred multidisciplinary members who are appointed by our attorney general to the Sexual Assault Task Force and they serve on one of eight subcommittees and come together in what I like to think of as kind of a think tank that helps inform our work, inform the trainings that we offer statewide and nationally, inform the kind of technical assistance that we offer to first responders, preventionists, and others in the community. And then of course inform our policy work. And we've been around for almost 20 years and really excited to bring folks together to help improve Oregon's response to and prevention of sexual violence in Oregon.

ASHLEIGH: Great, thank you so much for giving us that background. What about the Oregon Law Center?

SYBIL: Well thanks, and really excited to be here, Ashleigh and Tori, and this is Sybil Hebb with the Oregon Law Center and the Law Center is a non-LFC funded, statewide, low-income legal services provider. And so we are centered in Oregon. Our mission is to achieve justice for low-income populations in Oregon and the way that we accomplish that is through the provision of civil legal assistance to low-income Oregonians. And we have offices across the state. Our primary role is to help people as they contact us to address the legal barriers and the barriers to justice that they're facing in their communities. And I serve as a policy advocate for the Law Center, most of our, all of our staff is dedicated to doing legal representation, but we have two individuals who try to address larger policy issues because we don't have enough funding to help every single person who needs individual legal assistance, so we do spend some of our resources trying to address policy change that will hopefully help reduce people's legal problems and therefore help solve problems on larger scale. And the reason that we're really interested in domestic and sexual violence issues and really have focused a

lot on domestic and sexual violence issues in the past is that so many of our clients come to us for help as they're struggling to escape or recover from domestic violence or sexual assault. And those issues just greatly contribute to the vulnerability of our clients and serve to further trap people in poverty and crisis so we spend as a policy advocate, I spend a significant portion of my time working on policy and legal solutions to try to help prevent and reduce the incidence of violence but also to help improve our state's response, so that's what brings me to this discussion.

ASHLEIGH: Great, well thank you Michele and Sybil, for giving us background and I think it's really important that you made that connection between the work that you're doing to achieve justice for low-income folks and then also seeing that so many of them were dealing with issues around sexual violence and domestic violence and you know, I know that even in my own family when folks have faced issues when they've needed some type of legal assistance and not feeling like they were in a position to be able to like afford that knowing that there are agencies such as the Oregon Law Center available is so important to communities, so thank you so much for the work you are doing. And of course, Michele, huge fan of the Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force and the work that you all do.

About SB 608, 5:40

ASHLEIGH: You know one of the reason that we wanted to talk to you so badly was because we are aware that Oregon recently passed what I believe, and correct me if I'm wrong, is the first ever statewide rent stabilization bill. And I know that there was strong support from the anti-violence community, so I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about the bill.

SYBIL: Well thank you and this is Sybil and I'll jump in and just describe a little bit about the policy bill and kind of what it does, and you're right, it was, or it is, the first statewide rent stabilization bill so we're extremely proud of that, really excited about this proposal, really hopefully laying the groundwork for future work in other states and ideally, at the national level.

The reason the Law Center got involved in this issue is that as you might imagine, housing and housing stability is also a huge issue for our clients and the housing crisis that's impacting Oregon has just been immense and vacancy rates are incredibly low and rents are incredibly high, supply is really low, and we are having a huge influx of population moving into our state so the crisis adds just and pressure points just really been at fever pitch. And we have realized that this crisis is having a hugely disproportionate impact on our most vulnerable clients, including survivors and looking at sort of the overlap of those issues, we realized that housing stability and the eviction crisis and the rent crisis were just having a double whammy effect on clients and populations that we really wanted to help.

And so the bill is a real I think success for our communities across the state and it does two things: and one is it prohibits eviction without cause in most tenancies. Before in Oregon, a landlord could evict a tenant any time without any reason through the use of what's called a no-cause notice. And so we were noticing mass displacement of clients and communities through the use of no-cause notices. And also, extreme rent increases, so we were seeing clients with 100%, 200% rent increases and you know, I know my family couldn't absorb a 200% jump in my housing costs with very little notice. And so those became really the functional equivalent of an eviction. So those two pieces were very important to us and those issues are what brought us to that bill, and I don't want to talk for too long so I can go into more detail if you'd like more detail about the proposals.

Shared roots of housing protections and sexual and domestic violence, 08:51

TORI: When we had talked before, we had talked about no-cause, no-notice eviction and how these dramatic rent increases are acting as vehicles for eviction and like you had said, they have such a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable Oregonians, too. So you talked a little about how the housing crisis in Oregon affects survivors, but I'm wondering now if we can talk a little more about how rent stabilization and eliminating no-cause evictions supports prevention of sexual and domestic violence?

MICHELE: One of the things that we, I think many of us recognize and the data tells us is that people are experiencing, who experience housing instability, displacement, homelessness, also experience high levels of sexual and domestic violence. We know that particularly, too, for women, communities of color, LGBTQ youth, who are also experiencing disproportionately higher rates of sexual violence, so let's say in Oregon where we've witnessed this drastic rent increases and no-cause evictions, that precarious nature of that housing instability has absolutely increased the likelihood of perpetration of sexual violence. I think all of us here all know that we are more likely to experience sexual and domestic violence perpetrated by someone we know and our experience in Oregon is that that's very true that for folks experiencing housing instability, displacement, and homelessness that they're experiencing violence from those they go to for help, and that can be in the form of forced, coerced, manipulated sexual activity in exchange for a place to sleep, food, and other means of survival. And so strengthening our policies to support housing stability, we acknowledge and recognize the protective factor that reduces the risks of perpetration and I think that's where this bill connected very kind of perfectly with the goals of prevention in our community.

ASHLEIGH: Yeah, Michele, and I know that, you know, we've done a lot around the strategies and approaches that the CDC technical packages

identified as being able to prevent sexual and domestic violence and I know that strengthening economic supports, I believe that's in both the sexual violence and intimate partner violence technical packages, so absolutely I see this connections so, you know, seamlessly to being able to act as a buffer to multiple risk factors really.

TORI: When we had our original call and we were chatting about this bill, it was, it was pretty soon after it was passed that we got to sit down so one of the pieces of that conversation that really stood out to me that I would love for us to talk about again for our PreventConnect audience: we had talked about how no-cause evictions are essentially a mechanism of discrimination so I'm wondering if you all wouldn't mind having, kind of explaining that process and having that conversation with us again.

SYBIL: Great, and this is Sybil, and thanks for that question and you know, I think most states, including Oregon, have statutory protections against discrimination and against retaliation. And you know, that has been true in Oregon for decades, but what we found is that, with the increased housing pressures and housing crisis, the market has been so intensely in favor of the landlord that you know, people who are prone to being "bad actors" or not compiling with discrimination or retaliation protections could use no-cause notices kind of with impunity in a way that really undermined the protections that are so important to so many of our communities. So for example, a person who was being harassed by her landlord or being harassed by another tenant or wanting to assert her right to a repair that was important to the safety of the household, people are afraid to make those complaints or afraid to bring forward their rights because the landlord has the power, or had the power under our prior law, to issue a no-cause notice, which was essentially just impossible to challenge. And so, you know, if there was no-causes notices issued, you know, you were looking at a 30-day or a 60-day window in which you had to find another apartment or home in an extremely tight rental market where, you know, rents were extremely high and you know, what we were seeing was that people were, you know, either choosing not to protect themselves or assert their rights or they were finding themselves really facing the threat of homelessness because of the no-cause notice.

And just as an example, one of our clients called us because she had gotten a no-cause notice after she had dialed 911 and this is a common scenario if we, I think, have heard and seen across the nation really, our state statutes prohibit discrimination against victims calling 911 and yet, if the landlord uses a no-cause notice, it's extremely hard to challenge that. And this person was facing potential homelessness because of her effort to protect herself. So that's one example.

ASHLEIGH: That puts people in such a difficult position. You know, to have to choose between the possibility of facing homelessness, or staying in an unsafe environment whether it's not safe because of you know, violence that's happening, or just because of like physical, you know, issues in, in the, the residence (*cross talk*). Right, exactly.

TORI: And then not being able to assert your rights as a tenant, too. I am so grateful that this bill passed. And that will have such a positive impact across Oregon.

Bringing sexual and domestic violence prevention to the housing conversation, 16:05

TORI: I think what's really interesting to think about with this it, you know, we're talking about housing, we're talking about sexual and intimate partner violence prevention and response, and I feel like that connection maybe isn't always super clear for folks because we are so used to, speaking from being in a sexual and intimate violence prevention practitioner role, we're so used to working in silos and having very little opportunity in the past to collaborate and form partnerships with other key sectors like housing like you all have been able to do. So I'm wondering if you all can describe how you were able to collaborate and to bring a sexual and domestic violence prevention and response lens to this process and to this rent stabilization bill.

SYBIL: As you all know, I'm not a prevention expert and so I'm still learning this piece and really just has been so, this is Sybil, so grateful to the Sexual Assault Task Force and to Michele for kind of helping to give us some of the words that we needed to describe the prevention impact. You know, I really, I feel like, at legal aid, we were able to kind of sense that there was something out there and Michele and the Sexual Assault Task Force, I think, really helped us begin to learn how to talk about the prevention aspects.

MICHELE: Yes, I'm happy to, Sybil, and I appreciate that introduction because I'll admit, I'm not sure that we actually considered what we were doing was bringing a prevention and response lens to the process of this bill, but it does, it makes sense when we think about it. And when we think about response and prevention as opposite sides of the same coin, and it also makes sense when you consider the role of oppression and inequity in which violence is rooted in. So kind of going back to some of the previous comments that Sybil made, and thinking about displacement and housing instability and those folks who are disproportionately impacted in those situations being so connected to folks who are disproportionately impacted by violence. And so when we look at those root causes of those housing instability and displacement and the root causes of domestic and sexual violence, they're very much connected and so while I don't think we actively considered that we were bringing that lens to this work, I think it's just so

inherent in not only the mission of the organizations and the partners--many partners who came together, it's much broader than the Task Force and the Law Center, of course--but that the mission and kind of underlying drives recognizing those very root forms of violence and root causes of inequity in our communities. And so with this Alliance, we were able to identify that together, certainly we're stronger in this effort and that in and of itself, this kind of positive relationships, as we know, is a protective factor against violence. And so I appreciate that even without having those conversations and thinking, more actively thinking about how response and prevention blends together contributed to this effort, we kind of naturally did that, it's just the way of that, that was the foundation of where we came from and the ultimate goal of passing this bill.

SYBIL: I so echo those comments and I feel like really kind of everything I do is sort of, I don't know I'm doing it before it happens, so it's nice hearing you describe it that way. But I think, I was just thinking as you were talking, Michele, about a particular case that legal aid saw. And this particular no-cause notice, it actually wasn't discriminatory, it was the closure of an entire building, so everyone got a no-cause notice, and that's another aspect of this dynamic is that you have mass eviction, and this was in Grants Pass, Oregon, so it was a small town and I think there were 60 units, I could be wrong about that number, but it was a large number of units, and everybody got an eviction. So all families coming out into the tight rental market at the exact same time and one of our clients, and she testified in the hearings, this is a public story, that she had a teenage daughter who was in her last year of high school, the notice came in the spring, and they had to be out, I think it was in March, and they couldn't find a place. They spent all of their savings on 2 weeks in a motel and then moved into the car because they didn't have anywhere else to go and, you know, as a result of all of this, her teenage daughter missed a lot of school, you know, due to the stress, due to the constantly not knowing where you were going to spend the night. And you know, all of the other challenges that came up, and she was no longer on track for graduating on time. And so, you know, just think about a young girl at that time in her life is already vulnerable to many of the dynamics of violence or dating violence or assault and those additional challenges and just the trajectory that that eviction notice caused for that whole family struck me as something that, if there's any way that we can prevent that and all of the attendant damage, that's a huge policy priority for us.

And I was also just going to say, I don't know if you heard of the book *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond and does just a really great job of, I think, illustrating some of the extreme challenges that low and moderate income people have dealing with the rental and housing crisis, but Desmond, to Michele your point of disproportionality, Desmond has a great quote which is that "if incarceration has come to define the lives of men from impoverished Black neighborhoods, eviction is shaping the lives of women" and he goes on

to say, "poor Black men were locked up and poor Black women were locked out." And just thinking about it from the national perspective of entire populations really being shut out of, you know, homes, but also neighborhoods and communities and places where they're rooted. And all of the impacts of that.

ASHLEIGH: Wow, thank you for sharing that, that book and that quote, we'll definitely link that in our blog so folks can find that if they're interested. I mean, I think that as you were sharing that story, I was just thinking about how any time that you start to strip people of basic human needs, like housing, that creates such a ripple effect across all other areas of, you know, their social interactions and relationships and all facets of life, really. And so it does feel like housing is such an important priority when we're trying to prevent, not just sexual and domestic violence, but across violence types and other inequitable conditions. So yeah, thank you so much for kind of leading us through that.