

The passing of SB 608: A housing stability and sexual and domestic violence prevention win in Oregon

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

Sybil Hebb

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As housing instability concerns grow across the country, the state of Oregon is taking action to support local families. Housing stability means “having choice over when and under what circumstances a household wants to move.”ⁱ On February 28, 2019, as a way to address the housing concerns felt by 40 percent of Oregon households who rent their homes, the state passed Senate Bill (SB) 608, which limits no-cause evictions and the amount that landlords can increase rent each year. Passing this bill required a broad and organized coalition of advocates. As part of the coalition, sexual and domestic violence agencies and survivors were able to make the case for why housing stability is critical both for preventing sexual and domestic violence and preventing homelessness of survivors of violence. Research shows that individuals who experience housing instability face higher risk of rape, physical violence or stalking by a partner compared to those who are housing secure.ⁱⁱ Without access to safe and affordable housing, families may live in conditions that are unsafe and overcrowded with persistent fear of loss of stability, which may create highly stressful situations that make it difficult to regulate emotions and practice non-violent social skills.ⁱⁱⁱ At the same time, sexual and domestic violence are a leading cause of homelessness for women and children.^{iv} These sorts of insights helped build the case around the importance of SB 608 in Oregon.

HOW DOES SB 608 SUPPORT HOUSING STABILITY?

Prior to the bill, landlords could raise rent as often or as high as they wanted and could evict tenants without stating a reason – even if tenants paid their rent on time and followed all the rules. This resulted in rent increases as high as 30, 40 or even 100 percent with little notice. “High rent increases were contributing to mass displacement and increased risk of homelessness,” says Sybil Hebb, the director of policy advocacy at the Oregon Law Center. “The market was very favorable to landlords and property managers, which allowed bad actors to misuse laws in discriminatory and retaliatory ways with particular impacts on communities with low incomes, communities of color, women, and survivors of violence.”



Organizers and advocates celebrate the official signing into law of SB 608 – Photo courtesy of Stable Homes for Oregon Families

The new bill limits no causes evictions so that if a tenant has been in their home for more than a year, a landlord can no longer evict a tenant without a legitimate reason. It also places a cap on how much a landlord can increase rent each year (no more than 7% plus inflation) in any building or home that is at least 15 years old. These sorts of protections support stability for renters in Oregon.

THE COMING TOGETHER OF HOUSING AND THE SEXUAL AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FIELD

Every year in Oregon, sexual and domestic violence survivor advocates and allies work together to create a policy priority list. While housing instability is one of many interrelated factors that contributes to sexual and domestic violence, it was the [number one issue](#) that came up overwhelmingly across counties in the state by survivors, advocates and allies who work in the sexual and domestic violence field – specifically the lack of housing protections and barriers to accessing stable, affordable housing. State and local sexual and domestic violence agencies and advocates were able to plug into a broad-based network of nearly 20 different organizations focused on housing, communities of color, LGBTQIA issues, education and child protection, healthcare, and more called Stable Homes for Oregon Families. Each partner lent its lens on the issue of housing instability and together, the breadth of perspectives offered by this new network, helped broaden legislators' understanding of the importance of a state response to the issue. The formation of the Stable Homes for Oregon Families network holds promise for future work that can be done collectively on other related issues.

HOW HOUSING STABILITY DECREASES RISK OF VIOLENCE—AND VICE-VERSA

"In Oregon, women face significant rates of housing instability and are the most cost-burdened in the state," says Sybil. Advocates used personal stories and research to help legislators understand how housing instability puts people at risk for violence and how SB 608 supports prevention. They spoke to the impact of housing instability on families such as financial hardships, loss of community, increased stress, and depression.



Renters and advocates rally in support of stable homes for Oregon families." – Photo courtesy of Stable Homes for Oregon Families

The advocates shared how job disruption is a major outcome of eviction or large rent increases and how rising housing costs increases dependence on partners with abusive behavior.

Throughout the SB 608 campaign, the press was particularly excited to hear these important perspectives. Traditionally, there had not been much coverage on how housing instability impacted those at risk for violence. Partners in the network wrote op-eds and letters to the editor. They wrote these perspectives informed by stories and quotes collected through a statewide survey on how housing stability reduces domestic and sexual violence and how tenant protections help victims of abuse.

In their [op-ed](#), Michele Roland-Schwartz from the Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force and Jayne Downing from Center for Hope & Safety wrote, "as domestic and sexual violence advocates, we know the importance of a safe and stable place to call home. Yet in today's statewide housing crisis, too many Oregonians live with housing instability, caused by low-vacancy rates, drastic rent increases and non-cause evictions."

The sexual and domestic violence agencies in Oregon and local survivors and advocates built a strong case for SB 608 and played a pivotal role in the bill's successful passing. It was a true collective effort, drawing on the power and strength of diverse voices all uniting to achieve a common goal.

ENDNOTES

- i <https://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/paper-atkinson-greer.pdf>
- ii Breiding, M.J., Chen J., & Black, M.C. *Intimate Partner Violence in the United States—2010*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014.
- iii John Hopkins Center to Eliminate Cardiovascular Health Disparities. (2016). *Stable Housing*.
- iv https://nnedv.org/latest_update/domestic-sexual-violence-homelessness/

Sybil Hebb is the director of legislative advocacy at the Oregon Law Center, a statewide law firm whose mission is to ensure access to justice for low-income Oregonians. She worked as a lawyer representing survivors of domestic and sexual violence in family law, protection order, housing, and employment matters for 10 years before moving into legislative policy advocacy. She is committed to ensuring that policy discussions incorporate the voices and perspectives of survivors and advocates.

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RESOURCES

- [Web conference recording and slides](#)
- [Video on SB 608](#)
- [Fact Sheet: Just Cause Eviction and Rent Increase Protections](#)
- [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#)
- [Oregon Alliance to End Violence Against Women – 2018 Priority Setting Survey Results](#)
- [Special Project: Safe Housing Partnerships](#)
- [Testimonials in support of Oregon SB 608](#)
- [Op-ed: Housing stability reduces domestic and sexual violence](#)
- [Op-ed: My View: Tenant protections help victims of abuse](#)

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