

May 5, 2021

House Committee on Housing
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street. NE
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Health Share Letter of Support for SB291A

Dear Chair Fahey, Vice Chair Campos, Vice Chair Morgan, and Members of the House Committee on Housing:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer Health Share's support for SB291A. Health Share is a Coordinated Care Organization (CCO) serving over 380,000 Oregon Health Plan (OHP) members in Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington Counties. We are here to advocate on behalf of our members, who continue to bear a disproportionate burden of the pandemic's economic and health impact. We proudly endorse the concept of individualized assessments as a pathway to open housing opportunities for OHP members living with criminal histories.

As Oregon's largest CCO, we are a Medicaid organization that is proud to advocate for the comprehensive quality of life needs of our diverse membership. We recognize that health equity can only be achieved when members of historically underserved and oppressed communities have stable housing alongside access to barrier-free health care. Health Share will continue to play a critical role in the formation of housing-related public policy by bringing clarity around the needs of specific subgroups within the OHP population that remain at risk of falling between the cracks. Amongst those populations most at-risk are OHP members with criminal records, who encounter many barriers in their efforts to be adequately housed. The overlap between OHP membership and the criminal justice system is very real. We believe that SB291A is necessary to expand housing opportunities to responsible housing seekers who would otherwise be left with no other options.

When it comes to Health Share's members, even a single booking in the criminal justice system is associated with more healthcare utilization and chronic homelessness. This correlation manifests itself through heightened use of high-cost medical services, including in-patient psychiatric stays and avoidable emergency department visits. Rates of substance abuse and mental health treatment also climb for the very same reason. Critically, however, the opposite is also true when it comes to housing OHP members; successfully housing Medicaid members is associated with reduced healthcare utilization and lower booking rates in criminal justice. In other words, OHP members who have attained housing stability demonstrate better health outcomes and less interaction with criminal justice systems. Therefore, housing is key to lowering health care costs and improving population health.

The failure to create a pathway to housing for those with criminal records disproportionately burdens low-income individuals on OHP as well as communities of color. From a criminal justice lens, nearly half of black males and almost forty percent of white males are arrested by the age of twenty-three in the U.S. This challenge also has impacts far broader than the effect on any specific demographic group, as nearly one-third of the adult working age population has a criminal record. This population has significant overlap with Medicaid enrollment. We cannot continue to ignore this connection.

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SB291A opens doors for OHP members to rebuild their lives as opposed to leaving them permanently closed. It gives a housing seeker the opportunity to explain the circumstances surrounding one's criminal history and use their application to highlight steps that have been taken to be better since being convicted of a crime. It also allows applicants to provide letters of character support from those that know them or include a letter from a health care provider about how a previously undiagnosed medical condition might have played a role in their past. This bill does not require any applicant to be accepted into housing by a housing provider. Instead, it simply guarantees an applicant for housing the ability to have additional mitigating information considered as part of their overall application.

Health Share wants to be part of the solution, and SB291A is a big step in the right direction. If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to reach out to Yoni Kahn, Director of Public Policy, at kahn-jochnowitz@healthshareoregon.org.

Sincerely,

James Schroeder, CEO
Health Share of Oregon