February 28, 2019

Assemblymember David Chiu
Chair, Assembly Committee on Housing and Community Development
1020 N Street, Room 162
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Support for Assembly Bill 53 (Jones-Sawyer)

Dear Assemblymember Chiu,

On behalf of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), we write in support of Assembly Bill 53 (AB 53), which prevents residential landlords from discriminating against applicants based on prior criminal history.

LAHSA is a joint powers authority of the City and County of Los Angeles and serves as the lead agency in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (CoC). LAHSA is responsible for funding a significant portion of the interim housing, permanent housing, and supportive services for individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County.

By limiting the use of restrictions on individuals seeking to rent a housing unit, AB 53 helps ensure that Californians are not prevented from fair access to housing opportunities based on past actions alone, while promoting the safety and well-being of our communities. In Los Angeles' tight housing market, sky-high rents and low residential vacancy rates limit housing options for many. Meanwhile, landlord practices that deliberately screen for past offenses amplify the housing crisis for those with criminal records and intensify pre-existing barriers to rehabilitation and success. By denying residents a chance at housing, these practices inadvertently place thousands of women, men, and, in many cases, entire families at high risk of housing instability and future entry into homelessness.

We see the link between homelessness and criminal justice involvement here in Los Angeles County. According to the 2018 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count, 60% of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness report having some type of involvement with the criminal justice system. This rate of overrepresentation bears out nationwide, where experiences with incarceration can make a person ten times more likely to become homeless than the general public.\(^1\)

While several factors drive people into homelessness, we know that access to safe and affordable housing lifts people out. For residents exiting our prison and jail systems, stable housing is associated with lower risks of recidivism and higher chances for successful re-entry, leading to safer and less costly outcomes for all. Yet, studies consistently find that numerous factors including rental policies that restrict entry for housing, make it difficult for individuals to locate and access permanent housing even long after their release.

The resulting instability leaves individuals at high risk of repeat encounters with law enforcement, re-arrest, and incarceration.\(^2\)

Without access to stable housing and space to heal, these obstacles trap individuals in a vicious cycle of homelessness and recidivism that can come at high costs to communities across the state. Taking into account the costs of emergency care visits, frequent public safety calls, and other factors, homelessness can cost local governments up to $60,000 per person annually.\(^3\) Incarceration, research suggests, costs states even more. The California Legislative Analyst’s Office finds that California pays roughly $81,000 per person incarcerated in the state prison system.\(^4\)

If passed, AB 53 would also serve to upend policies that perpetuate the racial disparities that, in part, fuel the homeless crisis in our communities. Housing practices that bar applicants with criminal records disproportionately impact communities of color, increasing the stark racial disparities that exist in our homeless populations. Not only are these communities overrepresented in the criminal justice system, research finds that race intensifies housing barriers for those with criminal records. A recent survey finds that while 24% of respondents reported difficulty finding housing due to a past criminal conviction, people of color were 61% more likely to report housing challenges.\(^5\) Last year, the LAHSA Commission convened the Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness to identify and report on the root causes of the overrepresentation of black and African Americans in the County’s homeless population and advance strategies for systems change. Among the recommendations arising from the Ad Hoc Committee’s report are support of efforts to remove these housing barriers through legislation like AB 53, which is vital to advance racial equity across our homeless crisis response system and ultimately reducing homelessness in the state.

We strongly support this bill as a necessary step in reducing barriers to housing for the tens of thousands of Californians who have served their time. At a time when access to affordable housing is a challenge for too many, we must do what we can to ensure everyone has a fair chance at housing when available. This is central to our work in reducing and preventing homelessness in our communities. We look forward to continuing to work with the Legislature on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Sarah Dusseault  
Vice Chair, LAHSA Commission

Peter Lynn  
Executive Director

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\(^4\) California Legislative Analyst’s Office. (January 2018.) “How much does it cost to incarcerate an inmate? California’s Annual Costs to incarcerate an Inmate in Prison.” https://lao.ca.gov/policyareas/ci/ci_Inmatecost