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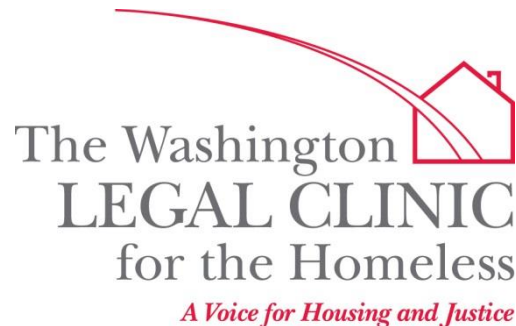
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D.C. Council Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization- Hearing on the *Local Rental Application Voucher Amendment Act* and the *Rental Housing Source of Income Amendment Act* – February 20, 2020

Testimony of: Brittany K. Ruffin, Affordable Housing Advocacy Attorney

Good morning, Councilmembers. I am Brittany K. Ruffin, Affordable Housing Advocacy Attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. Since 1987, the WLCH has envisioned and worked towards a just and inclusive community for all residents of the District of Columbia—where housing is a human right and where every individual and family has equal access to the resources they need to thrive. Unfortunately, our vision is still that—a vision. Currently, there is no right to housing; and, it is hard for the vast majority of our vulnerable residents to focus on thriving when basic survival has become such a challenge.

Housing access remains a monumental challenge for low-income D.C. residents. When an ICH workgroup on eliminating barriers to rental housing for residents experiencing homelessness was officially dissolved, the advocates within that group decided to continue to do the work. The workgroup had identified credit scores, eviction history, criminal records, and voucher discrimination as the most significant impediments to rental housing for people experiencing homelessness. With a strong desire and mission to continue to tackle those issues, the newly independent Tenant Barriers group was formed.

Through Tenant Barriers, we have continued to contemplate solutions to the barriers that residents face. We are pleased that there is a growing desire amongst councilmembers to address some of the barriers to housing that have been identified by the Tenant Barriers group. We appreciate the goals of the *Local Rental Application Voucher Amendment Act* and the *Rental Housing Source of Income Amendment Act*. However, we also recognize that these two bills do not address the fundamental and significant barriers that are most pressing for low-income renters. The two bills that are most focused on addressing the rental barriers are the *Fair Tenant Screening Act* and the *Eviction Record Sealing Authority Amendment Act*, and the Council must be intentional in focusing on legislation that succeeds in creating actual change to improve the lives of residents.

The *Fair Tenant Screening Act* attempts to make sure that landlords are required to implement fair and nondiscriminatory screening practices. It requires landlords to provide rental criteria and info prior to taking applications, sets standards for how application fees should be handled, and limits what landlords can ask about prior rental history. It also restricts income and

credit score inquiries for those with vouchers/other subsidies and prevents discriminatory fees for voucher holders.

The *Eviction Record Sealing Authority Amendment Act* requires landlords to give notice for nonpayment of rent, provides for the sealing of eviction records automatically and upon a motion, and makes it illegal to require information about sealed records.

The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless held seven community awareness and feedback sessions on these two bills in the fall. The majority of the sessions occurred at family shelters, and residents were enthusiastically supportive of these bills. They offered details of their experiences with discriminatory landlords and fees. We heard accounts of months passing without any information on submitted rental applications, exorbitant rental application fees, credit score restrictions, and other unfair and irrational requirements. Residents and clients were anxious to give feedback in order to make the bills even better.

WLCH has collected a plethora of testimony from residents that took the time to share their experiences in anticipation of a hearing on *those* two bills this spring. Unfortunately, Councilman Todd has yet to set a hearing, but residents want an opportunity to be heard. Since there are several pieces of legislation that aim to address issues facing renters in the District, the Tenant Barriers group has been working to merge the relevant parts of each bill into a single document of omnibus legislation. We anticipate further Council support in putting forth this comprehensive consolidation and opportunity for impacted residents to share their opinions and testimonies during one public hearing.