



Rules and Administration Committee  
Cook County Board of Commissioners  
118 N. Clark Street  
Chicago, IL 60602

To Whom It May Concern:

September 4, 2019

Thank you for providing us the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the Just Housing Ordinance Rules (Ord. No. 19-2394). The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) is an organization dedicated to safe and affordable housing for all of Chicago's residents. We believe that everyone should have a place to call home. It is our ultimate mission to not only prevent homelessness, but to put an end to it.

CCH has a strong history of advocating for the rights of marginalized people. As a member of the Restoring Rights and Opportunities Coalition of Illinois (RROCI), we have successfully advocated for the removal of barriers for individuals exiting the criminal justice system. During the 2019 legislative session, RROCI passed a bill that will make it a human rights violation to discriminate in real estate transactions against people with arrest records, juvenile records, and records that have been sealed or expunged. Governor Pritzker signed the bill into law late last month and will become effective in January 2020.

We strongly believe in giving people second chances and the opportunity to flourish in their community. CCH is a supporter of the Just Housing Initiative and in order to make this a successful re-entry opportunity for people with records, we have the following concerns and suggestions regarding the draft rules based off of our experience with the re-entry pilot program.

### **Re-entry Pilot Program**

Housing and employment barriers are the largest obstacles for returning citizens to overcome for a multitude of reasons. Without access to housing or employment, returning citizens are more likely to reengage in risky behaviors and reoffend. Although some individuals could be eligible for federally assisted housing, public housing authorities oftentimes have policies and procedures in place that disqualify a wide range of individuals with records. Recognizing this, CCH's Re-entry Committee decided to fight for greater housing opportunities for returning citizens. The re-entry committee is composed of and managed by formerly incarcerated people, service providers, educators, and advocates.

Together, the committee decided to engage with the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and the Housing Authority of Cook County (HACC) to advocate for more inclusive housing policies for people with records. The entities launched the Re-entry Pilot Program in 2015, to make housing available to a select number of individuals with records and hopefully

demonstrate how housing stability can drastically improve people's lives. Researchers have interviewed participants as they are placed in housing, and at six-month and 1-year intervals, looking for the impact of housing stability on an individual's ability to find work and achieve their personal goals. It is expected the study will be useful in showing the value of offering housing assistance to people with records.

Research is set to be completed in early 2020, but early data analysis indicates the positive impact that participants are experiencing by having access to housing. The pilot participants that have been interviewed thus far have maintained their housing and gained employment. The Re-entry Program will evaluate how to use this pilot and the research to further its housing advocacy. One idea is renewing the request that public housing authorities in Chicago implement a program that mirrors the New Orleans model. This model requires a panel to evaluate all applications for public housing and at least one member of the panel is a person who has been impacted by the criminal justice system.

### **Recommendations for Rulemaking**

As the Rules and Administration Committee contemplates rulemaking for the Just Housing Ordinance, we kindly ask that they consider our comments and concerns. Although we understand that the rulemaking process must consider oppositional points, it is crucial that the Committee does not stray from the original intent of this ordinance – to provide greater and fair housing opportunities for people with criminal records.

#### *No Exemption for Public Housing Authorities*

We ask the Committee not to exempt the Public Housing Authorities in Cook County from the standards set forth in the ordinance. Not only does this go against the spirit of the ordinance, but giving HACC and the CHA such broad power to deny any applicant housing because of their record, can prove dangerous. As government funded entities, HACC and CHA should be willing to provide housing to individuals seeking second chances. Secondly, having one set of rules for the housing authorities and another for private landlords can become overly complicated for implementation and oversight purposes.

#### *Removing Categories of Criminal Convictions*

CCH is very concerned about the specific categories of criminal convictions listed in the draft rules and we urge that they be removed from the final version. Listing specific offenses can prove to be very harmful for those seeking housing. For instance, a private landlord might point to a category in this list as a reason for denial, without giving the applicant a true chance to provide evidence of mitigating factors. Since one of the most important provisions of this ordinance is the individualized assessment piece, the landlord needs to be able to conduct an individualized review of the circumstances in good faith. Including this list of categories will without a doubt, exclude the very people this legislation was originally intended to assist. We ask the committee to remove the categories of convictions to ensure people are given a fair chance at housing instead of creating the opportunity for blanket bans.

### *Limit to Consider Criminal Convictions*

As an organization dedicated to housing opportunities for all, we believe landlords should not be allowed to consider convictions that are older than five years. A limit older than five years will only continue to exclude large amounts of people who desperately need housing. Furthermore, when reviewing housing applications, HACC and CHA do not consider convictions older than three years, unless federal law mandates it. This is a more progressive policy, which merits consideration by the Committee. Overall, we ask the members of the Committee to impose a look-back period with a maximum of five years.

### **Conclusion**

CCH would like to thank the members of the Rules and Administration Committee for allowing us the opportunity to write and submit testimony regarding the Just Housing Ordinance. We believe that the ordinance can be made stronger and offer more opportunities for re-entering citizens if our recommendations are considered. Individuals exiting the criminal justice system deserve the opportunity to flourish and become dedicated members of our society and we hope the final rules give them the chance to do so. Once again, thank you for your time and consideration.

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