

Sign Today In Support of Lifting Ban on Rent Control and Debt Forgiveness in the Wake of COVID-19

To Governor Baker, Speaker DeLeo, and Senate President Spilka:

We are members of Housing = Health, an advocacy group operating at the intersection of housing justice and public health. Established by members of the Harvard community who have lived experiences of housing insecurity and allies, we are founded on the principle that “those most affected must lead.”

The current pandemic makes it clearer than ever that housing policies and protections are a matter of public health. Given that COVID-19 will have long-lasting impacts, we are advocating for lifting the ban on rent control and rent/mortgage debt forgiveness to address the root of housing insecurity. Bills H.3924 and H.1316 must be passed on an emergency basis, as this pandemic has far-reaching impacts on those facing housing insecurity. Additionally, we are supporting the Healthy Housing Guarantee Petition which calls for the same demands.

In the wake of COVID-19 and the state-wide lockdown designed to prevent its spread, the 30-day moratorium on evictions and Rent Freeze are not enough. These measures simply defer tenant debt until after the crisis, leaving tenants to shoulder a growing financial burden. A burden that will only be exponentially compounded by a pandemic that is actively disrupting the global economy, local markets, interest rates, and job security.

While epidemiological data is lacking, some scientific modeling has shown that to avoid a death toll of 2.2 million people with current interventions like social distancing and shutdowns, the pandemic may easily continue for five months. Furthermore, it may take up to several more months before we fully develop, test and stockpile a sufficient supply of a vaccine for the nation. No matter the specific timeline, this pandemic will be a long-term problem, exacerbated by the lack of national coordination and failure of implementation of public health policies.

Rent control legislation is necessary not only when considering the potential infection spread, but also because of the vulnerability of the population at risk. Individuals facing housing insecurity are often immunocompromised due to intersecting injustices and thus more vulnerable to complications from coronavirus. In addition to affecting an already at-risk population, the emotional and financial stress of housing insecurity further increases risk of infections and chronic health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and asthma.

Moreover, it is no secret that the negative effects of displacement primarily target Black and Brown communities, forcing minority communities to stand by and watch as their health deteriorates, and social bonds are disrupted. All of these factors significantly increase the risk of poorer outcomes among those infected with COVID-19. Furthermore, even if tenants are

able to pay their debts, they will have to endure extreme psychosocial stress that will likely leave them more susceptible to the virus.

COVID-19 and the response to it disproportionately impact communities facing housing insecurity and may lead to the consequent degradation of health in this generation and future ones. Given the severity of the crisis we are facing in this city, and the vulnerability placed on those facing housing insecurity, we are calling for rent control to protect the health of those most marginalized. We cannot afford to wait until the emergency and the current interventions are over for rent control and rent/mortgage debt forgiveness. By that time, long-lasting damage to the health and livelihoods of the most vulnerable will have already been done.

We call for:

1. Effective rent control now (Bills H.3924 and H.1316)
2. Government commitment to forgiving rent/mortgage debts during the COVID-19 pandemic

We ask legislators for immediate action in these challenging times, and further seek support for the bills that would affirm a commitment to housing justice as an effective health policy measure.

Sincerely,

Housing = Health

Hanna Amanuel, Lawrence Carty, Norma Hylton, Terrance Mensah

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