

JUST HOUSING AMENDMENT GIVES RETURNEES A FAIR CHANCE TO SECURE HOUSING

The Cook County Board's Just Housing Amendment took effect on Dec. 31, 2019. The amendment protects more than one million residents of Cook County and their families by giving people with arrest and conviction records a fair chance at finding housing in Cook County.

The Just Housing Initiative, co-chaired by Housing Action Illinois and the Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance, has worked for years to achieve this major step toward economic and racial justice for families. Fair access to a safe, affordable home is fundamental to building a stable life and caring for yourself and your family, they note. Research shows that when individuals with records have stable homes, recidivism rates are reduced.

The leadership, testimony, advocacy, and enduring support of people with "lived experience" was critical to the amendment's passage. Sharing personal challenges of trying to find a place to call home changed hearts and minds and made it clear the amendment was needed by real people, right now.

Troy O'Quin, a veteran and community leader who now lives and works in Cook County, was joined by his wife and two daughters as he testified in April about his difficulties accessing housing due to his past record. As Troy says, "it takes only a second to break the law but a lifetime to live with the consequences. One second, one crime, one serious lack of judgment...in America this can be a life sentence."

The Just Housing Amendment:

- Ensures that housing providers and housing authorities do not consider arrests, juvenile records, and sealed and expunged records when evaluating someone's application for rental housing;
- Protects tenants and homeowners from being denied housing based on convictions more than three years old;
- Requires housing providers to conduct an individualized assessment for applicants with convictions that are less than three years old, considering factors such as the nature of the offense and how much time has passed since it happened.

One in 3 Americans has an arrest record before they turn 23. Blanket housing bans against people with records disproportionately impact Black and Brown families as well as people with disabilities; they are often an avenue for race- and disability-based



discrimination. Jurisdictions across the country have passed similar fair housing measures as an integral component of criminal justice reform.

The Cook County protections will go into effect before the coldest months of winter set in, helping fight housing instability for the most vulnerable members of our community.

Supporters spent four years working to pass the Just Housing Amendment and another seven months working to pass rules to implement it. Together, the Just Housing Initiative's 100+ supporting organizations and allies prevailed. The steering committee includes Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County, Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance, Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, Community Renewal Society, Housing Action Illinois, Housing Choice Partners, John Marshall Law School Fair Housing Legal Clinic, Safer Foundation, Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, Supportive Housing Providers Association, Westside Health Authority, and the Woodstock Institute.

Commissioner Brandon Johnson was the chief sponsor on the Cook County Board, while early champions were co-sponsors Commissioner Larry Suffredin and Commissioner Jeffrey Tobolski. Board President Toni Preckwinkle added her support. The Cook County Human Rights Commission spent considerable time delving into the issue and discussing how to best implement it.

The Just Housing Initiative will be doing education and outreach with would-be tenants, landlords, and members of the public to help people understand the new protections in 2020.

- by Suzanne Hanney, from email sources