



April 8, 2020

The Honorable Governor Jay Inslee  
State of Washington

*sent via electronic mail*

Dear Governor Inslee,

Thank you for your strong leadership during this time of unprecedented crisis. The realities of the COVID-19 pandemic response are rapidly changing and complex. We in the Legislature are ready and eager to partner with and support you to meet the urgent needs of all Washingtonians. As you know, the requirements of the swift, decisive, and necessary “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order mean that tens of thousands of state residents are now unemployed, including many hourly workers, people who are the only income earners in their households, and people without financial resources to weather this evolving economic storm.

This public health emergency must not compound the already substantial housing and homelessness crises our state faces. In order for Washington to restart its economy when the state of emergency passes, Washingtonians must be stably housed so they can return to work. Many state residents who are homeless are at high risk for exposure to the virus and potential severe complications and death if they become infected. We must implement strong measures to ensure housing security and reduce further harm to our economy while continuing to strengthen our public health response and the ties that bind our communities together.

To that end, we urge quick action on the following:

**CREATE AN ONGOING, COORDINATING TABLE TO DIRECT HOUSING RELIEF EFFORTS**

A COVID-19 Response Coordinating Committee on housing and homelessness should include, at a minimum, legislators working in this area and the Governor’s team on homelessness and affordable housing issues, state and local public health and housing officials, well-informed advocates for landlord and tenants, affordable housing operators, mobile home owners and tenants, and behavioral health experts.

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The Coordinating Committee would create a centralized command to identify, coordinate, and respond to the evolving landscape of urgent needs in our homeless response and shelter systems, non-profit homeless and affordable housing providers, public health, volunteer and faith-based organizations, and other social and health services.

## **PROTECT RENTERS AND LANDLORDS**

### **1. Extend and expand eviction moratorium beyond its current April 17th expiration date.**

The public health crisis will not be resolved by then and recovery will not have even started. Most laid off workers will still be looking for gainful employment that will allow them to earn wages and become current on their rent.

- Expand the moratorium to prohibit all fees (not just late fees). These fees are not otherwise capped by the state and can be more expensive than rent.
- Include manufactured homeowners who rent the land their homes are on.
- Include tenants who have a lease with an expiration date so their tenancy can continue on a month-to-month basis.
- Include explicit language that tenants may not be evicted as a “safety threat” for having contracted COVID-19 and permit eviction only of tenants whose behavior poses a significant and immediate threat to others. The original language has allowed 10-day notices and evictions for minor compliance issues to move forward (such as having an unregistered pet or having family members staying with the renter household temporarily).
- Address early lease cancellations for college student renters and their landlords due to school closures. Many students have returned home and cannot afford to pay continuing rent on apartments and the lease cancellation fees. At the same time, landlords struggle to cover their ongoing expenses with no prospects of re-leasing units in the short term.

### **2. Temporarily freeze rent increases.**

Skyrocketing unemployment is disproportionately impacting renters. However, constituents tell us that rent increases continue. These increases will hamper people’s ability to get back on their feet when this crisis is over, and in some cases are causing people to leave stable housing in the midst of a pandemic.

### **3. Establish a robust rental assistance program.**

Create a program to supplement actions by local governments that lack the funds to meet the large, urgent, and ongoing needs of renters whose income has dropped or disappeared.

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- Allow the state to pay some portion of the rental arrears accumulated during the moratorium that helps meet landlords' actual expenses and holds tenant households harmless from eviction and collections of any remaining amounts.
- Create a longer-term rental assistance program that meets the needs of the renter households that will be disproportionately impacted by the economic downturn, including those excluded from the support available under the federal CARES Act.
- State dollars will be needed to ensure that immigrant households are able to receive assistance since the federal programs largely exclude immigrants from accessing that help.

#### **4. Issue a moratorium on all foreclosures.**

Enact a moratorium on all foreclosures and any late fees that may be associated with late payment of mortgages to protect renters, landlords and homeowners.

#### **PROTECT PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS AND IN CONGREGATE SHELTER**

The best way to prevent a COVID-19 outbreak in shelters is to eliminate congregate settings as quickly as possible. Individuals, couples, and families should have their own rooms. Some counties have started doing this but need state assistance to bring it to scale. We must move rapidly to secure and acquire thousands of additional rooms or tiny shelters/houses *now*. The state should centrally coordinate and facilitate the acquisition of such rooms or properties, providing financial support, technical assistance, and guidance to counties and nonprofits participating in this intervention.

#### **PROTECT PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS WITHOUT ACCESS TO SHELTER**

We must immediately stop displacing, disrupting, and dispersing people without shelter except in specific, unavoidable and emergency circumstances.

Most of the formal and informal locations where unsheltered people can rest and attend to hygiene have closed. In response, we must offer public-health-based outreach, assessment, and support to unsheltered people. This should include resources to shelter in place where feasible, reduce crowding, improve health and sanitation, and increase relationships that will support voluntary compliance with public health orders.

#### **WORKFORCE PROTECTIONS, STABILIZATION AND TRAINING**

Homelessness response and special needs housing providers are essential businesses but have faced significant reductions in their workforce due to the risks COVID-19 presents to high-risk and frontline workers. The suppressed wages in this sector also make it difficult to recruit and retain workers during this crisis. The state should help identify funding to provide premium pay to retain workforce. We must recruit, train, hire, and retain existing and additional staff to support current, shifting, and newly opening shelter, housing, outreach, and related services for people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. This should include rapid development of plans to employ people with relevant personal and professional knowledge and expertise who may have recently become unemployed; and

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to enhance education, develop professional skills, and increase cross-discipline training for current staff to build system capacity and resilience.

We must seek and deploy PPE for employees in these settings. Homeless service workers are last tier on the priority for PPE, but they are in some of the highest-risk environments.

We appreciate any quick action that you can take on these requests, which will help people in immediate need of relief from the negative impacts of this pandemic and the economic shutdown. Looking through a more long-term lens, it is important to remain focused on getting more people into stable housing. We thank you for your support and leadership on this effort, and look forward to continuing to work with you and your team on solutions that help more people and families obtain permanent supportive and stable housing.

Thank you for your work and for consideration of joining us in these urgent measures.

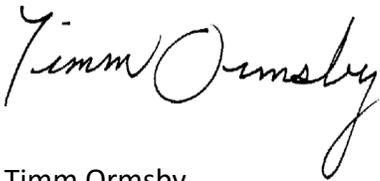
Sincerely,



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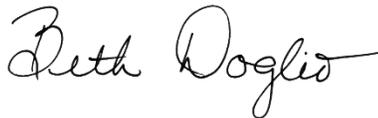
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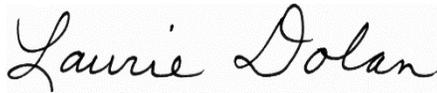


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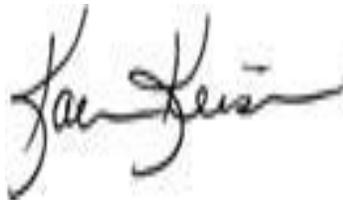
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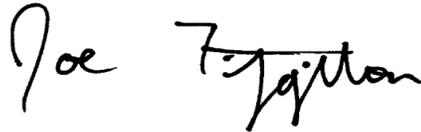
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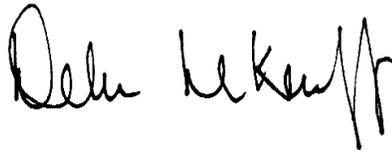


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