



January 24, 2023

Chair Michael Howard
Members of the Housing Finance and Policy Committee
Via Electronic Delivery

Re: Support for House File 319

Dear Chair Michael Howard and Members of the Housing Finance and Policy Committee:

Violence Free Minnesota (VFMN), the coalition to end relationship abuse, and the Minnesota Coalition to End Sexual Assault (MNCASA), jointly submit this letter to express our support for H.F. 319, and highlight the immense need for eviction reform and the prohibition of source of income discrimination. VFMN and MNCASA are statewide coalitions with over 120 member programs who provide advocacy and services to domestic and sexual violence victim/survivors throughout all of Minnesota's 87 counties. VFMN and MNCASA member programs work with survivors to address homelessness and housing instability through an array of supports including emergency shelter, housing programming, homelessness prevention resources, legal advocacy, and housing navigation services.

The interconnectedness between domestic violence and homelessness is staggering. Domestic violence has been identified as one of the top five reasons people experience homelessness in Minnesota. Survivors experience housing instability for a myriad of reasons. Evictions, the lingering consequences of past evictions, and the impact of source of income discrimination are all too often the impetus for a survivor being plunged into homelessness.

I. The Need for Increased Eviction Notice and the Expanded Access to Expungements:

Survivors face evictions for issues that directly stem from the abuse they experience, such as evictions for noise disturbances or property damage caused by their partner. Some even risk eviction for simply calling police for assistance. Evictions also result from the financial consequences of economic abuse. Studies have found that approximately 99% of survivors experience financial abuse in their relationships, which can lead to economic instability that impacts rental payments.

Regardless of what triggers an eviction, the negative impact for survivors is immense. An eviction on a survivor's record appears as an "eviction" indefinitely and is reportable by tenant screening agencies for the next seven years, whether the eviction was warranted or not, and even if the case is dismissed, settled by agreement from the parties, or the underlying circumstances change.



Record of an eviction can singlehandedly prevent survivors from obtaining access to safe housing. In a recent survey that Violence Free Minnesota conducted with survivors, nearly 50% of respondents listed past evictions as being one of the most challenging parts of the tenant screening process.

The story below, shared by an advocate from the Women’s Shelter and Support Center, a victim service provider in Olmstead County, shows how deeply an eviction can undermine safety and stability for survivors and their children.

“We worked with a woman who many years ago was able to divorce her abusive partner, but when he left the home and failed to provide financial help, she struggled with the rental payments and was evicted. The woman and her child were forced to double up with family, and then eventually move into our shelter. After exiting shelter, we were able to house her in one of our market rental units. During that time, she gained stability for herself and her child through schooling and employment. After some time, she decided to move to be closer to family. She secured a transfer for her employment and began a housing search. Yet, despite being employed, financially stable, and surrounded by a support network she could not find housing due to her prior eviction. An eviction that was now over 7 years old. Also, an eviction that was clearly related to the abusive situation she was no longer in, and in no way an indicator of her ability to be a successful tenant. Nevertheless, during her housing search she had several rental applications denied. After one instance she asked what the reason for the denial was and was told outright that it was the prior eviction. After a couple months it became clear that the past eviction was going to be a continuing issue. She was once again forced to move in with family.”

H.F. 319 contains practical solutions to address the housing barriers that survivors face every day.

- Financial assistance and legal defenses specific to survivors are often available in eviction matters, but survivors cannot access them due to how rapidly cases move forward. H.F. 319 would provide additional time for survivors to connect with a domestic violence advocate who can help them identify resources and avoid a needless or improper eviction and further destabilization and harm to victim/survivors and their children.
- Increased access to expungements, and measures protecting the reporting of eviction filings, also need to be in place to ensure that survivors are not further stigmatized and prevented access to housing due to a past eviction that is in no way is reflective of them as future tenants.



II. The Need to Prohibit Source of Income Discrimination:

Housing subsidies, such as vouchers, are an essential resource to prevent homelessness and secure safety for survivors. However, source of income discrimination undermines the effectiveness of these resources and places survivors at increased risk of violence and homelessness. Obtaining a housing voucher can greatly aid a survivor who is fleeing and attempting to flee violence; providing them with access to independent, safe, and affordable housing. But when survivors are turned away from housing, based solely on the fact that they are using a housing benefit to pay their rent, that bridge to stability crumbles. Housing vouchers provide an opportunity for change and security but allowing source of income discrimination to continue renders the qualified assistance unusable – a mere illusion of assistance. This strips our communities of an essential homelessness prevention tool, and further traumatizes and compromises victim/survivors and their children.

Source of income discrimination is consistently voiced by victim service providers across the state as a serious roadblock to housing for survivors. VFMN recently conducted a survey with member programs about the housing challenges that impact the survivors who they work with. When asked to which aspects of the tenant screening process create the most barriers for survivors, 48% of respondents included source of income discrimination.

Evictions and source of income discrimination heavily exacerbate the often-insurmountable hurdles that survivors face in finding safe housing, the foundation of healing and stabilizing their life and the lives of their children. These hurdles prevent survivors from fleeing abuse and lead to homelessness. We can't have survivors facing the choice of living with continuing violence or being homeless. We urge you to pass H.F. 319, and with it, create increased safety and stability for survivors and their families, so that the policies in place are no longer contributing to the harm.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Guadalupe Lopez
Executive Director
Violence Free Minnesota

Artika Roller
Executive Director
Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault