



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog
www.dcfpi.org

July 11, 2016

“Banning the Box” on Apartment Applications Will Make DC’s Investments in Affordable Housing More Effective

By Claire Zippel

The DC Council is considering a bill that would help remove a barrier faced by many residents who have had interactions with the criminal justice system – getting an apartment – when those interactions are unlikely to have any bearing on their worthiness as a tenant. The “Fair Criminal Record Screening for Housing Act” would not only make tenant screenings fairer and make it more likely that returning citizens can reintegrate successfully, it would also smooth the way for the District’s investments in rental assistance programs.

It’s not uncommon for people to have their rental application denied simply because they were flagged in a background check based on a non-violent offense or something that happened long ago. The Fair Criminal Record Screening for Housing Act would require landlords to instead take a more holistic approach to screening potential tenants. Modeled on the “ban the box” law for job applications, the Act would only allow landlords to deny housing after reasonably considering the nature and circumstances of the crime, as well as any evidence of the applicant’s rehabilitation.

Expanding access to housing for people who’ve interacted with the criminal justice system:

- **Helps Rebuild Stable Lives.** People who have recently interacted with the criminal justice system often experience housing instability and periods of homelessness.¹ Yet access to stable housing is critical to a successful reintegration, and is associated with a reduced likelihood of parole violations or subsequent offenses.² It’s also key to having a fair shot at a second chance. A person with stable housing is better able to find employment and be a reliable employee, care for a chronic health condition, or invest in their future by going back to school or attending a job training program.
- **Supports DC’s Investment in Rental Assistance Programs.** The Fair Criminal Record Screening for Housing Act will help very low-income and formerly homeless residents assisted by the District’s rental assistance programs move more quickly into affordable housing, as they will be less likely to be rejected by some landlords simply because of their background. The fiscal year 2017 budget [includes](#) \$5.6 million in new funds to help formerly homeless residents – some of whom have had past interactions with the criminal justice system – pay the rent at a private market apartment. The Fair Criminal Record Screening for Housing Act would help those new funds work more smoothly.

The Council should support legislation that makes it easier for people who’ve interacted with the criminal justice system to find housing.

¹ Herbert, C. W., Morenoff, J. D., & Harding, D. J. (2015). "Homelessness and Housing Insecurity Among Former Prisoners." *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 1(2), 44-79. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4762459/pdf/nihms-729845.pdf>

Metraux, S., Roman, C. G., & Cho, R. S. (2008). "Incarceration and Homelessness." In D. Dennis, G. Locke, & J. Khadduri (Ed.), *Toward Understanding Homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*. Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Retrieved from <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/pdf/p9.pdf>

² Herbert et al. See also: Fontaine, J. & Biess, J. (2012). "Housing as a Platform for Formerly Incarcerated Persons." Urban Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/412552-Housing-as-a-Platform-for-Formerly-Incarcerated-Persons.pdf>