

Written testimony submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly Housing Committee in support of HB 6588, An Act Concerning Rent Stabilization.

Dear Representative Luxenberg, Senator Moore, and members of the Housing Committee:

My name is Michael Johnson and I am a Franciscan Friar, living and ministering in Hartford. I am testifying in support of a rent cap and in support of HB 6588, with the *following amendments* to better protect tenants.

- A rent cap of no more than 3.0% This tracks pre-pandemic average rent increases and would be affordable and predictable for tenants. I strongly support a rent cap, but HB 6588 would be stronger with the following changes:
- It should cover apartments in between tenants so landlords can't push out tenants to increase the rent, causing them to lose their homes and Connecticut to lose more affordable housing at a critical time when we need more.
- It should expand good cause eviction protections to cover all tenants so they have greater stability in their homes.

As the Executive Director of the Franciscan Center for Urban Ministry (FCUM), in downtown Hartford, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges that many renters face in finding and keeping affordable and stable housing. At the FCUM, one way we serve the poor and marginalized is by serving dinner 365 days a year. Our numbers skyrocketed during the early days of the pandemic when many other providers closed down, but as they returned to service, our numbers dropped to roughly 35-40 people a night.

But that changed starting in April, 2022, when we steadily saw our numbers climb. Until by the fall, our numbers had more than doubled and our cost had risen 80%. Many of these newer folks were not unhoused, but were being squeezed by increases in rent, gas, food, utilities and while they may have had an increase in pay, it fell short of what was needed. This proposed rent stabilization program would help to address this problem by limiting annual rent increases for certain rental properties. Rising housing costs have created a significant burden for many low- and middle-income families in Connecticut. In many cases, renters are forced to spend much of their income on rent, leaving little left over for other necessities like food, healthcare, and education. This not only harms individual renters and their families but also has broader economic and social consequences for our communities.

I want to tell you one story about one of our "guests" at the FCUM. Victor is 70 years old, despite reaching the age when many are retired, he continues to work in a local factory. We don't see Victor for meals as much as many others. He mostly comes

toward the end of the month when things get tight financially. He has lived in the same apartment in a triple decker house on Franklin Ave in the Southend of Hartford for the past 16 years. Victor's previous landlord would raise the rents reasonably, but not more than \$50. He shared that two years ago a new owner purchased the building, and according to Victor, he also owns several other buildings. The first year, this new landlord raised his rent from \$800 a month to \$1000. a month. In 2023, the landlord again raised the rent, this time to \$1,400. This constitutes a 75% increase in rent in two years! How many of us could handle that burden? How many of us would find ourselves on the street if our cost of housing was increased like this? Victor stopped me outside the Center to ask me if there was something I could do about this. And so I offer his story as part of my testimony about why justice calls us to protect folks like Victor, to protect affordable housing in our state.

The vulnerability of Victor is not unique and many of the people suffering massive rent increases are doing so at the hands of out of state investors and owners. Approximately 34% of all Connecticut residents rent their homes, including 27.5% of seniors like Victor, many on fixed incomes, many with no financial resources to manage such unreasonable increases. But is this state? I had to tell Victor this is what our government allows such increases. The Fourth Commandment states Honor your father and mother. Victor and other vulnerable seniors in this state are our mothers and fathers and protecting them and others from exorbitant rent increases is how we honor them.

While Victor's case is egregious, he is not alone in having to face the challenge of a significant rent increase. In the last two years, the average Connecticut rent increase was 20%. Skyrocketing rent is driving homelessness and increasing evictions. A \$100. increase in rent translates to a 9% increase in homelessness. In 2022, Hartford's homelessness jumped 13% after years of decline.

I also am a Franciscan priest and my Catholic faith reminds me that our scriptures state repeatedly to take care of the poor and marginalized. My religious tradition calls me to speak out against injustice. If a 75% rent increase on a 70-year-old isn't injustice, frankly, I don't know what is.

We have a problem in this state. Overall, 78 percent of registered voters consider the state "unaffordable." There is strong support for action on this issue and this is what our people want our legislators to do now. 86 percent say it is "very important" or "somewhat important" that Connecticut work to make housing more affordable. About 91 percent say it's important to prevent existing residents from being priced out of their homes. 72% of registered voters say they support capping rent increases at 2.5 percent. This housing survey was sponsored by the collective, Growing Together Connecticut and administered by the polling firm Embold Research, which reached 2,562 registered voters in Connecticut online Jan. 23-30, 2023. Its margin of error was 2.1 percent, according to the firm.

Not only would the passage of this bill protect tenants, but also landlords and the broader community. By ensuring that rental properties remain affordable and stable, while still allowing for inflation and a decent return on investment, we can help to reduce the number of evictions and homelessness in our state, while also supporting economic growth and stability of neighborhoods. We talk about the need for more affordable housing in our state. Not losing the current stock we have to unreasonable rent increases is a key piece of this.

Because our 49 congregations represent so many vulnerable people who financially are on the edge, our "Rent Cap" position at GHIAA is more in line with the language in SB 138 which provides for a lower cap than allowed in HB 6588 and the establishment of rules for no-fault evictions. SB 138 reflects what the aforementioned survey revealed-72% of registered voters support capping rent increases at 2.5 percent. We accept, however, the premise that in politics the enemy of the best is not the good, and this bill is a good first step to protecting folk like Victor.

I urge you to support HB6588 AN ACT CONCERNING RENT STABILIZATION and take action to address the urgent issue of affordable housing in our state. By doing so, we can ensure that all Connecticut residents have access to safe, stable, and affordable housing and that folks like Victor do not end up homeless.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Fr. Michael Johnson OFM

Exec. Director, Franciscan Center for Urban Ministry