

February 5, 2019

The Honorable Governor Inslee
The Honorable Washington State Senate and Washington House of Representatives
P.O. Box 40500
Olympia, WA 98504

RE: Support SB 5600 / HB 1453

Dear Governor Inslee, State Senators, and State Representatives,

As General Counsels and Chief Legal Officers of some of Washington's most significant private employers, we speak with one voice in urging the legislature to take a substantial and low-cost step towards addressing our housing crisis by passing the eviction reforms contained in SB 5600 / HB 1453.

We are all well aware of the housing challenges facing our region, and the companies we work for are all engaged in various forms of public and private efforts to work with our communities to confront those challenges. But even apart from our work in developing more affordable housing and ameliorating homelessness, we need to prevent struggling families from becoming homeless in the first place.

Evictions are a leading cause of homelessness in Washington. Unfortunately, Washington's laws governing evictions are woefully outdated and make it extremely difficult for struggling families to keep their homes.

According to a recent study of 1,218 evictions from 2017 by the King County Bar Association and Seattle Women's Commission:

- Nearly 90% of evictions were for nonpayment of rent – and the majority of those occurred for one month or less in rent nonpayment;
- 51.7% of tenants in eviction proceedings were people of color, twice what would be expected based on WA demographics;
- Legal fees and court costs routinely assessed on tenants have devastating consequences for those who fall behind on rent; in one case, a tenant was forced to pay \$3,400.00 in legal fees and court costs after falling behind \$600.00 in back rent.

As recently as last month, we've seen troubling reports of landlords pursuing evictions while a tenant was in the hospital or over trivial amounts of money – as small as \$2.00.

Perhaps most damning, Washington's eviction laws lag far behind other large cities in needlessly forcing tenants out of their homes. According to the same study, "a Bronx [legal assistance] program found it was able to prevent eviction in 86% of cases in which the program was involved. Similarly, a Boston pilot program found that tenants with counsel retained their homes two-thirds of the time. . . . In comparison, the low number of tenants who were able to remain in their housing in Seattle (23.4%) despite procuring counsel suggests there are additional obstacles for tenants to be able to maintain housing, including a lack of available resources and legal protections for tenants."

Simply stated, Washington's eviction laws are a root cause of our homelessness problems, and we can take a significant step toward addressing them now – at minimal cost to taxpayers – by simply updating them in some common sense ways this legislative session. For these reasons, we believe it is crucial for the legislature to quickly pass SB 5600 / HB 1453.

We also support an amendment to these bills that would prevent courts from automatically shifting attorney's fees or court costs to tenants in actions for nonpayment of rent. While these costs are routinely imposed in Washington, they are rarely awarded in other states. Yet they exacerbate our current crisis by creating incentives to evict tenants for small amounts of money and by layering even more debt on tenants trying to catch up on their rent.

Our communities are more robust when everybody has a stable home. We want families to be able to live in Washington without fear of losing their homes because of one medical emergency, temporary unemployment, or other hardship. Yet our state's housing crisis has hit low-income families the hardest, driving out families who have lived in their homes for years. This legislation would restore some balance and fairness to our legal system without burdening landlords.

While there is no one policy solution to this complex and devastating housing crisis, we are heartened to see lawmakers introducing legislation that would have immediate positive impact and could help prevent unjust evictions that push families into homelessness.

We urge lawmakers to quickly pass the reforms in SB 5600 and HB 1453, which will strengthen our communities and stabilize families for the future.

Sincerely,

Tracy Daw,
SVP, General Counsel & Secretary, Funko

Robert Dzielak
Chief Legal Officer & Secretary, Expedia Group, Inc.

Rachel Gonzalez
EVP, General Counsel & Secretary, Starbucks Corporation

Kyle Levine
VP, Legal, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary, Alaska Airlines, Inc.

Diankha Linear
VP, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary, Convoy, Inc.

Michael Parham
SVP & General Counsel, RealNetworks

Fred Rivera
EVP & General Counsel, Seattle Mariners

Dev Stahlkopf
Corporate Vice President and General Counsel, Microsoft Corp.

Kathy Surace-Smith
VP, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary, NanoString Technologies, Inc.

David A. Zapolsky
SVP, General Counsel & Secretary, Amazon.com, Inc.