



Nation Outside



Jackson Mayor introduces housing ordinance to protect justice-impacted families from discrimination

'Fair Chance' rule gives people with a criminal record hope for a safe home

JACKSON — Nation Outside today joined Jackson Mayor **Derek Dobies** and City Councilmember **Will Forgrave** as they introduced a Fair Chance Housing Ordinance to City Council. This new ordinance would give people with a criminal record a chance to find safe and affordable housing for their families within the city. If enacted, the Fair Chance Housing Ordinance would end the practice held by some landlords and rental management companies who automatically deny rental agreements to anyone who has a criminal record, no matter what a person's arrest or conviction record shows or how old the information may be. If approved, Jackson would join several other cities in Michigan that have already enacted similar housing policies, including major metropolitan areas and smaller cities.

"Blanket housing denials based on prior convictions are inhumane, and will no longer be a part of the compassionate, equitable city we are building together," said Mayor Derek Dobies, who led the city's efforts to pass internal ban-the-box policies for employment applications. "This policy will ensure housing stability as we underscore that fact we are a tolerant, inclusive city."

"This policy is just common sense," said City Councilman Will Forgrave. "Landlords will still be able to perform background checks under this ordinance, they just won't be able to discriminate against minor offenders or prospective tenants with offenses that have long passed."

A number of Michigan cities already have Fair Chance Housing ordinances. Detroit enacted one in 2018, followed by Kalamazoo and Ypsilanti last year. Around the nation, other cities with similar ordinances include Washington D.C., Seattle and Minneapolis. These policies are helping people with criminal records — who comprise about [a third of the adult U.S. population](#) — secure safe housing for themselves and their families.

Proponents of Fair Chance Housing rules point out that without them, many people with a criminal record face a harsh stigma and prevalent discrimination policies designed to keep them out of safe and affordable housing. Several landlords routinely exclude anyone with a conviction on their record from renting, even if the conviction was for a minor offense or occurred decades ago. This discrimination continues despite 2016 guidance from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development warning landlords that [blanket bans on people with a criminal record are tantamount to racial discrimination and therefore illegal](#).

"Finding ways for people with criminal convictions to have access to secure housing leads to safe communities," said **Tony Gant**, the Jackson coordinator for Nation Outside, a nonprofit led by justice-impacted people working for criminal justice reform. "Formerly incarcerated people who have housing are more likely to be employed, more likely to seek further education, and [less likely to engage in crime](#)."

The Fair Chance Housing ordinance under consideration in Jackson would require landlords and management companies to determine that an applicant is otherwise qualified to rent and make a conditional lease agreement before inquiring about an applicant's criminal history. It would also be prohibited to reject an applicant for any of the following:

- an arrest that didn't lead to a conviction;
- participating in a deferral program;
- an expunged offense;
- a juvenile conviction;
- misdemeanor convictions more than five years old;
- or civil infractions.

The proposed Jackson ordinance would allow property owners to deny leasing to people who are or have been:

- convicted of violent offenses;
- on the sex offender registry;
- people convicted of arson, metal theft, vandalism or damaging real property;
- people convicted of crimes against landlords, management agents or other tenants;
- or people who have a drug-related conviction in the past five years.

Mayor Dobies and City Councilmember Forgrave have asked City Administration to place the Fair Chance Housing Ordinance on the agenda for the February 23, 2021, City Council meeting.

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Nation Outside (www.nationoutside.org) is an organization working for criminal justice reform that is led by people who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system. Nation Outside uses community education strategies and civic engagement initiatives to inspire members and the community to get involved in knowledgeable, sustainable, and socially just forms of advocacy to support currently and formerly incarcerated folks, their loved ones, and their communities in order to inspire and create real reform in the criminal justice system. Safe & Just Michigan is currently the financial sponsor of Nation Outside.