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## Aiyash, Gant: Pass statewide fair chance housing legislation

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"Housing is about so much more than a roof over your head — it's the foundation for success at school, work and in the community," Gov. Gretchen Whitmer emphasized just last month while unveiling a \$250 million investment aimed at rehabilitating outdated housing stock in Michigan. Her words couldn't be timelier.

April marked the 56th anniversary of the passage of the Fair Housing Act, a federal law designed to prevent landlord discrimination against potential tenants and home buyers based on factors such as skin color, religion, beliefs and more. This law safeguards against discrimination, which persists in various facets of American life, including the housing market. But there are plenty of people in Michigan — more than two million, in fact — who are not fully covered by the Fair Housing Act and therefore do not benefit from the same protection against housing discrimination.

These folks are Michiganians who have had interactions with the criminal legal system and are asked to be honest and “check that box” when applying for rental housing, only to encounter difficulty securing a place to call home. This challenge persists regardless of the level of the past offense or how long ago that mistake was made. Their sentence length or current financial stability holds no significance. No consideration is given to whether they are someone's parent or caretaker, or if they are holding down a job to support themselves and their families.

The whole texture and history of a life is narrowed down to one question: “Have you ever been convicted of a crime?” When the answer is “yes,” the odds of a Michiganians securing housing go down drastically.

If you believe that an individual has completed their sentence, undergone the rehabilitation assigned to them and been deemed ready to reintegrate into society by the legal system, then surely they deserve the right to seek housing and be evaluated solely based on their qualifications as potential tenants. As any small business owner can attest, a good customer pays promptly and abides by the establishment's rules.

The Fair Chance Access to Housing Act (HB 4878), which has been introduced in the state Legislature but has yet to be brought to the floor for a vote, aims to protect these two million residents from housing discrimination. It proposes that landlords conduct background checks after considering the tenant's merits independently and mandates an individual assessment if the applicant has a conviction history.

This policy is not new to Michigan. Since 2019, Ann Arbor, Jackson, Kalamazoo and Detroit have all passed local Fair Chance housing ordinances. Just last week, the Detroit City Council endorsed HB 4878, a move that follows on the heels of the Lansing City Council's endorsement last month. It's time to expand this patchwork of local solutions to state-wide legislation.

HB 4878 is a common-sense policy solution that benefits everyone in our communities, and it would be a step in ending the crisis of homelessness. Safety within our neighborhoods and in our communities is a legitimate concern for every Michigan resident, and one that we should take seriously. A large body of research shows that access to housing reduces crime, especially among people re-entering our society after prison. The fearmongering notion that reducing housing discrimination will increase crime, or reduce our safety, is false.

Everyone deserves a discrimination-free process to apply for a home. We agree with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer; housing is much more than a roof over your head. But let's start with the roof.

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