To the members of the Anchorage Assembly,

The Alaska Public Interest Research Group (AKPIRG) is writing to voice strong support for AO 2020-66, an ordinance that would provide a whole suite of critical services intended for the houseless community in Anchorage. As the state and country continue to experience an explosion in the number of COVID-19 cases, it is evident that the financial and public health crisis caused by coronavirus will not end anytime soon. As the protracted financial crisis continues to cause financial ruin in Anchorage and across the country, an increase in houselessness and COVID-19 cases seems to be inevitable unless the Assembly takes preemptive action. AKPIRG believes that AO 2020-66 is a bold investment in housing and addiction services that would not only do wonders to alleviate the impact of an impending eviction wave, but have long-term public health benefits for our community as a whole.

The reopening of the Alaskan economy does not adequately address the loss of income for thousands across the state during this pandemic. Many individuals, especially those in the retail, hospitality, and service industries, have been unable to pay their bills due to COVID-19 and are now months behind on payments. The protections against utility shut-offs and evictions afforded to Alaskans through SB 241 were instrumental in preventing these individuals from losing housing and essential services. However, as of July 1, the protections against evictions and repossessions expired, and as experts from Mayor Berkowitz's Economic Resiliency Task Force stated, we expect an “eviction tsunami” as a result. This “tsunami” coincides with the closure of temporary shelters across the city, such as the Ben Boeke Arena, which was reverted to an ice rink in June.
In addition, according to research done by the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness (ACEH), Anchorage has had a historically unmet need for housing. In a report released by ACEH this month\(^1\), there is a gap of nearly 3000 housing units (including shelters, transitional housing, rapid relocation housing, and permanent housing). According to research commissioned by the Municipality\(^2\), COVID-19 will only exacerbate this pre-existing gap in housing. Due to the need for social distancing, the number of beds in many facilities is anticipated to be less than half of what they usually are; Brother Francis and Anchorage Gospel Rescue Mission both have limited capacity due to the current pandemic, for example. With the impending eviction tsunami and as we approach the colder months, we can presume that without further action, we will see an unprecedented level of need coincide with an unprecedented lack of shelter capacity.

Not only will there be a housing crisis without decisive action from the Municipality of Anchorage, this housing crisis will likely exacerbate our existing public health crisis. According to the American Public Health Association\(^3\), HUD\(^4\), and the CDC\(^5\), homelessness is acutely tied to higher risk of contracting infectious disease. Therefore, we can safely assume that this “eviction tsunami” will also play a large part in spreading COVID-19. Given that the number of cases has shown no signs of slowing down (with Alaska reaching its peak number of active cases on June 25th), an increase in homelessness will all but guarantee a spike in COVID-19. Homelessness also exacerbates issues such as food insecurity, substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness. This will not only strain our state’s limited medical capacity, but also strain our social services, which are already struggling to deal with the current crisis. It is therefore imperative to create and provide adequately distanced shelter to as many people as possible in order to curb the spread of COVID-19.

\(^5\) [https://www.cdc.gov/phlp/publications/topic/resources/resources-homelessness.html](https://www.cdc.gov/phlp/publications/topic/resources/resources-homelessness.html)
Long term, the investment in multiple new shelters and other social services is a critical step towards addressing houselessness in Anchorage. This investment in 4 new facilities would provide hundreds of beds, critical addiction intervention services, and other resources for helping these people achieve stability, safety, and rehabilitation. These proposed services are in line with the “Housing First” principles that have been touted by HUD Secretary Ben Carson, Executive Director for the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Matt Doherty, the National Alliance to End Homelessness⁶, and an ongoing Anchorage Housing First initiative, which states that provision of housing is a critical first step in getting people to engage with services such as substance abuse treatment and job training programs.

Therefore, it is AKPIRG’s belief that this ordinance would have a multiplier effect on Anchorage as a whole, as it helps our most vulnerable populations transition into stable, safe, and healthy housing, and ultimately gainful training/employment. To make our Anchorage communities safe and whole, we must prioritize the net benefits that this initiative would provide for our city overall, and create a thriving Anchorage for everyone.

We urge the Anchorage Assembly to use your authority to codify AO 2020-66, which would not only help alleviate a historic housing and public health crisis, but also provide a meaningful expansion of transitional housing services for years to come. Unprecedented challenges require unprecedented solutions and this ordinance is a bold and timely step in the right direction.

Sincerely,

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⁶ https://endhomelessness.org/what-housing-first-really-means/