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OPINION

Stable housing is a key tool for economic stability

As Congress continues working to pass the Build Back Better Act to make bold investments in housing, Massachusetts must make the Tenants Opportunity to Purchase Act a reality for families across the Commonwealth.

By **Ayanna Pressley, Lydia Lowe, and Denise Matthews-Turner** Updated November 17, 2021, 10:56 a.m.



Arlene Cribbs watches her grandson Aaron Gillenwater in June. Cribbs rents a two-bedroom apartment in Jamaica Plain and has been trying to buy a single-family house. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

While the housing crisis strikes a chord across communities, gentrification and displacement does not affect communities equally. [Race is the strongest predictor of eviction](#) in Boston, over and above indicators of poverty.

Today's housing crisis is the legacy of decades of redlining, racial covenants, discriminatory eviction, and foreclosure practices. That is why [7 out of 10 of Boston's first-year pandemic eviction filings](#) occurred in census tracts where the majority of renters are people of color. Displacement following property sales has particularly impacted neighborhoods in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and East Boston.

And displacement is not just a Boston thing. In the year prior to the coronavirus pandemic, two-thirds of multifamily home sales in the state's Gateway Cities [were all cash](#). This trend is hitting hard in the five majority-minority cities of Lawrence, Lynn, Chelsea, Springfield, and Brockton, where more than 40 percent of the renter population was already rent burdened — paying more than 35 percent of household income on rent.

On the flip side, stable housing is a key tool for economic stability, educational access, a supportive community, and a healthy life. Safe, stable housing for all is a lifesaving matter of public health.

The 2008 foreclosure crisis-induced economic recession created a massive wealth transfer, with [Black households losing about half of their wealth](#) in the five years following. While Congress bailed out Wall Street, Black and brown families did not receive the support they needed. As city and state leaders look to rebuild from today's financial crisis, spurred by the pandemic, we have the opportunity to learn from past harms and build back better for marginalized communities.

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This is the moment to repair the generations of hurt, harm, and policy violence inflicted on our most vulnerable and neglected communities. And it starts with the simple idea of keeping people in their homes.

On the federal level, the Build Back Better Act is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to expand affordable housing access, tackle the racial wealth and homeownership gaps, and promote safe and healthy housing. Housing is health care, it is stability for children, it is climate justice, and it is racial justice. Housing is infrastructure, period.

As we continue to advocate for housing justice at the federal level, the state Legislature has the opportunity to keep vulnerable tenants in their homes and provide the keys to first-time ownership by offering them the first right to purchase. The [Tenants Opportunity to Purchase Act](#), sponsored by Representative Rob Consalvo and Representative Jay Livingstone in the House and Senator Patricia Jehlen in the Senate, would help address the continued pressure real estate speculators and institutional investors place on housing prices by giving tenants and nonprofits a chance to preserve affordability and stem displacement. It would do that by offering tenants of multifamily housing the right of first offer to purchase a property at market value and the right to match a third-party offer.

Keeping people in their homes not only prevents displacement but also makes communities stronger. This is within our grasp. As Angela Davis once said, “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change, I am changing the things I can no longer

accept.”

Housing is a human right, and all of us must share in an equitable future. As Congress continues working to pass the Build Back Better Act to make bold investments in housing as critical infrastructure, Massachusetts must create a new legacy and make the Tenants Opportunity to Purchase Act a reality for families across the Commonwealth for generations to come.

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