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Chairman Kerns
Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee

For the record, my name is Tootie Welker. I was the executive director of Sanders County Coalition for Families (SCCFF), based in Thompson Falls, for 15 years. I left in 2010 in order to go back to school to obtain a PhD in sociology. After over 20 years in the trenches and not seeing the issue of violence against women recede, I decided to gain the theoretical knowledge to see if looking at the issue through a different lens I might come up with some better options.

I have been working on this Housing bill since 2005 when I had a survivor I was working with get sued for several months of rent because she needed to leave the area to escape a very dangerous, I mean life and death, situation. Her abuser had threatened to kill her many times and told her if she ever left she'd be dead and six feet under where no one would ever find her. She had two small kids and she was scared. About 75% of women who are killed by their abuser are killed either while they are in the process of leaving or after they have left. So ending a violent relationship can be extremely dangerous. For her and her daughter's safety she had no choice but to leave the area. Yet because her name was also on the lease and he quit paying rent, she also became financially liable for the unpaid rent.

Victims of domestic and sexual violence or stalking should not have to decide between safety and worrying about being sued because they need to break a lease. And for many victims who want to stay, having the locks changed is imperative. While I understand that portion of the bill may be deleted, I want to express to the committee how critical changing the locks is to the safety of women and children. And the landlord would not be responsible for the cost so it's win-win. I know SCCFF used to pay almost monthly to have a victim's locks changed and we never had any problems with the landlords in Sanders County. They wanted the women and children to be safe too.

In eastern Montana where there is a huge housing shortage, landlords are evicting victims because their batterer has been outside screaming or just because there was a violent incident. Victims cannot control the behavior of abusers and should not be held responsible for their behavior. Other victims in eastern Montana have been denied housing because it is known in the community they are victims. Is that how we keep women and children safe? Women and children shouldn't fear losing their housing due to the violent behavior of another.

As of 2010, twenty-six states and the District of Columbia all have housing protections such as the ones included in this bill. The remainder of the States has introduced similar legislation. The 2005 Violence Against Women act includes many of these protections for victims living in public housing or using federal housing vouchers, including the right of redress under fair housing laws.

An issue that was accidentally left out of the bill was the ability of the landlord to bifurcate the lease if the victim has a Temporary or Permanent Order of Protection giving her the home. This is another important piece that needs to be included to once again protect victims of domestic and sexual violence or stalking.

I pray the committee gives HB 550 a due pass.
Thank you.