

My name is Jessica Lopez. I'm an activist and organizer in Lancaster County. I'm a mother of 4 kids. I've struggled my entire life to secure safe, stable housing and that struggle continues today.

Growing up my mom was in a series of abusive relationships and we were in and out of shelters. I was exposed way too early to a life that landed me in an inescapable cycle with the criminal justice system.

By the time I was a teenager I was in an abusive relationship of my own that lasted for four and a half years. One night the cops were called. I had a black eye and was clearly the victim, but the cops started arresting me. I freaked out. I felt betrayed and angry and I'm not proud of this but I spit at the cops.

They charged me with 8 felonies and 5 misdemeanors. I sat in jail for 3 months with a \$250,000 bail. I eventually plead out with 4 felonies on my record.

A felony record limited the jobs I could get and made it impossible to get housing assistance. So I can't get subsidized housing but I can't afford rent for a family of 5 making \$9 an hour. Plus I'm still in the grip of an oppressive criminal justice system.

I've come a long way since that night I was arrested and I'm doing everything I can to give my kids a better life. But I feel like Sisyphus. Like as hard as I push I'll never get out from under everything stacked against me.

That never felt more painfully true than in my last housing situation. In 2017 I moved with my mom to Millersville. With her as the primary applicant we were able to get a house in a really good school district for my kids that I would have never been able to get with my record. Eventually my mom was able to transfer the lease to me. I could barely afford the rent of \$1000 a month but I felt like this was an opportunity to keep my kids in this house and keep them in this school district.

I made it work. I would take my kids to school then catch two buses to go to work at Burger King for \$9.50 an hour. I'd then come home, put my kids in bed, then go to my second job as a bartender. Wake up and repeat.

There were some red flags about the house. The basement flooded and ended up being covered in mold which the landlord just told me to clean up myself. At the time I was just trying to power through and make it work.

But nothing could have prepared me for the day I took my son for a check up and the lead levels in his blood came back dangerously high. My son who wants to be an aerospace engineer when he grows up could have developmental issues because he was poisoned in our home. I felt like the worst parent ever. How with me giving my all and doing my best did I make my baby sick

and possibly ruin his life? His dreams may never come true and he might never be able to function as an independent adult. I feel like I failed him personally as his protector.

I learned his lead levels were high but not high enough to get justice. Not only could I not hold the landlord accountable, I couldn't leave. I wanted to get out of that house immediately for my kids' safety, but our landlord wouldn't let me out of the lease. I felt trapped. I couldn't afford to leave if I was going to be charged for the rest of the rent to break the lease.

I feel like we were preyed on. The landlord knew we were desperate for a house we could afford in that area and he took advantage. He got away with poisoning my kid to make a profit.

When I had no other option we ended up in a shelter. We spent Thanksgiving, two of my kids' birthdays, and Christmas in the shelter.

Eventually we found a new place in January. I got a better job closer to where we lived. This house also has issues. A pipe burst in the ceiling the first week we were there. Still, I was feeling hopeful. And then everything shut down because of the pandemic and I lost my job. I've been barely hanging on for the past year while I've watched friends illegally get evicted.

I'm now clear eyed that this is not just a me problem. I did everything I could working 2 jobs and I still couldn't find a safe home for my kids. This is a systemic problem. Me and now my kids have been set up to fail. I shouldn't have to be a superhero to just provide safe shelter for my kids and get them a good education.

All I see right now are band aid solutions for extremely deep wounds. Too often, well meaning lawyers can really only help you after the fact. After the tragedy happens. If we really want justice we need to remove the systemic barriers keeping people from accessing safe housing they can afford. If I've served my time I should be able to return home and get housing just like anyone else. If I'm paying rent I should be guaranteed a home where my kids are safe. Otherwise I'm just trapped, set up to fail. I'm here today asking you all to do more to break down the systemic barriers stopping people like me from having safe, affordable housing.