

Saving the Brooke Amendment:

Keeping Rents in Public Housing Affordable

By Nora Priede von Herber

One important piece of public housing history is the Brooke Amendment and how it was saved 36 years after it was passed - a story we can learn from, even decades later.


Passed in 1969, the Brooke Amendment set a cap on public housing rents for the first time. It was named after Massachusetts U.S. Senator Edward Brooke III, a Republican politician and lawyer, and signed into law by President Nixon, also a Republican. Prior to the Brooke Amendment tenants were charged rents that were not tied to their income and often paid more than they could afford. In the 1960s, this led to rent strikes.

When the Brooke Amendment passed it established a clear policy that rents could not be more than 25% of a tenant's income. The amendment was a significant step in ensuring long-term housing affordability and preventing tenants from getting pushed out of their homes as housing costs increased. In 1981, during the Reagan Administration, the cap was raised to 30%.

Thirty-six years after the Brooke Amendment was passed, Republicans in Congress introduced a "public housing reform" bill intended to deregulate public housing. The bill included a provision that would eliminate the Brooke Amendment. The Republicans' rationale for repealing the Brooke Amendment was that it was believed to be a disincentive to work and public housing

needed to attract working people who could pay high rents.

This elimination of the Brooke Amendment put 2.7 million households in danger of losing the rent-cap safe guard. Determined to keep the cap, the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI), the Center for Community Change (CCC), the National Housing Law Project (NHLP), and the Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants (Mass Union) joined together and launched a campaign to save the Brooke Amendment.



Save the Brooke Amendment

An Open Letter to All Members of the United States Congress

February 27, 1996

Dear Members of Congress:

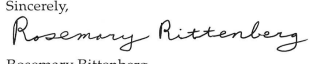
As concerned public housing tenants, we call upon you to **save the Brooke Amendment**. The clock is ticking.

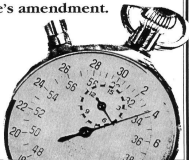
In 1969, U.S. Senator Edward Brooke, a Republican from Massachusetts, sponsored landmark legislation which established that rents in public housing should be no more than 25% of a tenant's income. In 1981, that 25% went up to 30%. The point of the Brooke Amendment was to hold rents at a **fair** percentage of income.

Now, **some members of Congress want to break this promise**. They want to repeal the Brooke Amendment in H. 2406 and S. 1260. They want to give housing authorities unrestrained power to raise rents above 30% of income.

There are **145,000 families** living in federally subsidized housing in Massachusetts whose rents would be raised by repeal of the Brooke Amendment. If our rents are raised, many of us will be forced out of public housing. **And if we can't afford public housing, where will we go?** Housing in the private market is unaffordable.

The only way the poorest among us will be assured access to government assisted housing is to limit rents to a fair percentage of our incomes.
Keep the promise Congress made in Senator Brooke's amendment.

Sincerely,

Rosemary Rittenberg
President of the Massachusetts Union
of Public Housing Tenants



Open Letter to Congress

In February of 1996, Mass Union published an **Open Letter to Members of Congress** signed by their president, Rosemary Rittenberg (*see previous page*). It called upon Congress to save the Brooke Amendment and outlined what was at stake for 145,000 Massachusetts tenants:

"If our rents are raised, many of us will be forced out of public housing. And if we can't afford public housing, where will we go."

Tenants went door to door with the Open Letter, using it to educate other tenants about what was happening and as an opportunity to register tenants to vote and build political power.

Organizers knew they had to be strategic about how they went about getting political support in a Republican-controlled Congress. The argument to save the Brooke Amendment was then born: Republicans in 1996 were breaking a promise made by Republicans in 1969.



*Back Row: Rep Torkildsen, Senator Brooke, Rep Blute
Front Row: Annette Duke, Susan Bonner, Paulette Turner,
Wanda Alvarado (left to right)*

The Press Conference

MLRI reached out to Senator Brooke to inform him that his Amendment was under attack. At that time, Massachusetts had two Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives, Representative Peter Blute and Representative Peter Torkildsen.

To amplify the message that the Republicans were breaking a Republican promise, MLRI, CCC, NHLP, and Mass Union organized a press conference on Capitol Hill with Reps Blute and Torkildsen, and Senator Brooke. Three tenant leaders from Mass Union flew down to DC: Wanda Alvarado who was Rep. Blute's constituent, Susan Bonner, who was Rep. Torkildsen constituent, and Paulette Turner, a Mass Union member.

Prior to the press conference, Wanda had done important ground work. She met with Rep. Blute and invited him to her apartment to see the conditions she lived in. Upon seeing the apartment, Blute was surprised at how small it was and acknowledged that he would not want to live there. Wanda also informed him that she had been registering tenants to vote. Wanda had his attention.

Her conversation was remarkable for many reasons, the first being that a tenant was able to get a representative to come to their apartment and see how they lived. Instead of preparing a large fact sheet full of statistics and political jargon, the tenant made a personal impact by inviting her elected leader into her world and lived experience. Rather than getting discouraged or intimidated by the fact that he was a Republican, she had a one-on-one conversation with him

about her day-to-day life and what obstacles she faced.

Through this conversation with Wanda, Rep. Blute was able to get the other side of the story that he was not hearing from the housing authority. And because of this conversation, she was able to convince Rep. Blute to come to the Republican-only press conference with Senator Brooke. Likewise, Susan Bonner invited her elected official, Rep. Torkildsen to the press conference. Both said yes immediately.

The goal of the conference was to pressure members of the U.S. House of Representatives to vote to save the Brooke Amendment. Organizers hoped Brooke, Blute, and Torkildsen would send a message to their Republican colleagues - that this was a Republican issue, and thus should be solved by Republicans.

Shortly before the press conference, Mass Union and MLRI published a press release. Rep. Blute issued a quoted saying:

"I stand with Senator Brooke because I have heard and learned from public housing residents in my area that we must keep rents in public housing affordable. Back in my district, I have spent time with public housing residents in their homes, talking to them about issues. If the Brooke Amendment is completely repealed, families will no longer be able to afford even the most basic shelter."

The day of the press conference, *The Boston Globe* and other media outlets published articles about what was at stake if the Brooke Amendment was eliminated. At the press conference, Wanda and Susan spoke about the impact this would have on their lives and the public housing community. Senator Brooke urged Blute and Torkildsen to go to their Republican colleagues to save the Brooke Amendment.



Susan Bonner from Mass Union at the Press Conference.



Rep. Torkildsen, Rep. Blute, and Senator Brooke at the podium.

The Op-Ed

Weeks after the press conference, Brooke published an op-ed in *The Boston Globe* about the amendment. His opening line was his own lived experience:

"As a young man starting out on my own, my father taught me that if I was paying more than 25 percent of my income on rent, I was paying more than I could afford."

Brooke's strong message still rings true today:

"Congress should not withhold operating subsidies from public housing authorities and try to balance the budget by reaching deeper into the pockets of our poorest people. ... I fear that the real intention in repealing the Brooke Amendment is to abandon federal public housing. This misguided and hard-edged legislative action will destroy the foundation of our federal housing policy."

Shortly after the op-ed was published, the Brooke Amendment was upheld, with no changes to the cap on rent.



Moving Forward

Behind these efforts were tenants who had shared their stories and living situations in hopes of shedding light on the reality of public housing. Equally essential was the role the press conference played in uniting Republicans around a common goal, to maximize bipartisan support for public housing.

While the political landscape in the U.S has changed significantly since this campaign, including increased polarization and attacks on democracy, these lessons still hold meaning today. This is especially true in local politics, where policy objectives are often clearer and there are more shared experiences uniting people together, regardless of political affiliation. This campaign demonstrated the power of shared experience and collective humanity. As channels for organizing expand, especially through social media, and past frameworks to learn from, we are more equipped than ever to harness the power of large groups of people.

The Edward Brooke Courthouse stands a few blocks from Boston City Hall. Named after an individual who fought for housing equity, it is home to Eastern Housing Court. Tenants pass through its doors each day, underequipped with legal resources to advocate for themselves. They walk out losing their home and too often their dignity. We need to put the lessons from the Save the Brooke campaign into action to fuel housing advocacy so that all have a right to housing.

Assistance with the article was provided by Annette Duke, Housing Attorney at the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute.

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