



Testimony before the House Finance Committee

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House Bill 7 – Proponent

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on housing-related provisions of House Bill 7. My name is Amy Riegel, the Executive Director of COHHIO. We are a coalition of organizations and individuals committed to ending homelessness and to promoting decent, safe, fair, affordable housing for all, with a focus on assisting low-income and special needs populations.

For decades now, housing costs have grown faster than incomes, especially for those working lower wage jobs. Then in late 2020, we started seeing housing costs really spike. Average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Ohio increased by 24% between August 2020 and August 2022. Renters now need to earn at least \$19.09/hour to afford a basic 2-bedroom apartment in Ohio. But only three of the 10 most common jobs in our state pay that much. This has created a situation where today nearly 708,000 Ohio renters are spending over half their income on rent.

You may be wondering: What do these facts about housing have to do with House Bill 7? Well, actually, a lot. At this juncture, your zip code is a greater predictor of your health outcomes than your genetic code - and this is especially true for children. Where you live has a direct impact on your health. Housing instability and poor-quality housing greatly exacerbate chronic health conditions and these health disparities can persist for years; asthma diagnoses, ED visits, and healthcare spending are significantly higher even through age six.

The connection between stable housing and health outcomes is why we strongly support House Bill 7 and the \$8 million allocation to expand the Healthy Beginnings at Home program to support the completion of the program in its intended form.

There are reams of data linking housing insecurity and long-term chronic health conditions. But, there was practically no research on how improving a family's housing conditions can positively impact health, until the initial Healthy Beginnings at Home pilot launched in 2018.

Healthy Beginnings provides housing assistance to reduce the risk of infant mortality and improve the chances that babies will be born full-term and with a healthy birth weight. The initial pilot (which the program in House Bill 7 is based on) provided rental assistance and services to 50 housing-insecure women and families, while another 50 households received only maternal and prenatal care services, but no stable housing. At the conclusion of the study, the data showed:

- Zero fetal deaths among babies in the housing intervention group, but four deaths in the control group;
- 40 of the 51 babies in the housing intervention group were born full-term at healthy birth weights compared to just 24 of 44 babies in the control group, and;
- Babies in the housing intervention group were 60% less likely to utilize the NICU and those that were admitted to the NICU stayed just eight days compared to 29 days for those in the control group.

The Healthy Beginnings pilot also demonstrated that housing intervention can greatly reduce healthcare spending. The average Medicaid claim to deliver babies in the housing intervention group was only \$4,000, compared to \$22,000 for babies in the control group. The program even improved other family members' healthcare utilization; overall spending was reduced by \$300 per person/per month – a substantial healthcare savings.

Based upon the positive results of the initial pilot, the partners agreed that the program should be replicated to reach a larger group of pregnant women in the hopes of providing statistically significant results. The funding in House Bill 7 for Healthy Beginnings at Home would expand this intervention to approximately 300 additional women, across 5 Ohio cities.

The House's version of the biennial budget included a \$16 million appropriation to fund the replication and expansion of Healthy Beginnings to a full-scale scientific study in Franklin, Montgomery, Hamilton, Summit, and Cuyahoga counties. However, the Senate cut funding for Healthy Beginnings 2.0 to \$3 million in the final budget bill.

This lesser amount of money is helping to keep extremely vulnerable women and their families stably housed, which is fantastic. But the appropriation was not enough to reach the necessary sample size, which is critical for making Healthy Beginnings a self-sustaining program. Research is a critical element to this program, it is what will take this work from an emergency intervention to an evidence-based best practice that becomes a new model for supporting pregnant women, like HUD's Veterans Affairs Supportive Services (HUD-VASH) program that has been so effective in moving veterans out of homelessness into permanent housing.

Healthy Beginnings at Home is not a theoretical endeavor; it does not just study or evaluate outcomes. This allocation of funding directly impacts Ohioans. Of the funding needed for Healthy Beginnings at Home, 88% of the investment goes directly to families enrolled in the program. The dollars support the payment of rent, security deposits, utilities, safe sleeping arrangements and other needs that mom may have as she moves from homelessness to a place that she and her baby can call home. The vast majority of the \$8 million included in House Bill 7 will directly allow Ohio families to thrive so that the littlest Buckeyes have a strong start.

I want to thank Rep. White and Rep. Humphrey for recognizing the fact that safe, stable, affordable housing is a key ingredient for raising healthy families. I applaud you all for including Healthy Beginnings in the House's priority legislation to improve infant and maternal health and wellness.

When fully funded, I am confident that Healthy Beginnings 2.0 will establish an innovative, new model to reduce infant mortality that could be replicated throughout the United States. Healthy Beginnings 2.0 is the first large-scale research project of its kind. By supporting House Bill 7, we can all be proud that Ohio is leading the nation in using housing interventions to save babies' lives and improve healthcare outcomes while constraining healthcare spending.