

Chair Reynolds, Vice Chair Johnson, and members of the Select Committee on Housing, my name is David Brightbill, I am the Executive Director of Washinton-Morgan Counties Community Action, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the need for more affordable housing both rental and owner occupied in Ohio especially rural areas. I appreciate your attention to this issue.

Washington Morgan Counties Community Action is a two-county private non-profit serving both Washinton and Morgan counties. The agency provides a variety of housing related services including home rehabilitation, weatherization and rental assistance for families facing homelessness and Veteran households. Additionally, we are the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher operator for the City of Marietta, and own multiple apartments which we provide to mental health and developmentally disabled individuals as part of a greater affordable housing effort.

The variety of housing services we provide gives us a unique perspective on the issue of affordable housing including lack of affordable rental units, high costs of home maintenance and repairs as well as how the lack of housing affects rural communities.

The issue of affordable rental housing is one our clients are faced with on a daily basis. As the Public Housing Agency operator, it is not unusual for clients who are issued vouchers to take more than three (3) months to lease up. This is due to families not being able to find rental units that fall within the allowable fair market rents, which are approximately 20% below the average rental price. Our rural communities, like others in the state, have seen a sharp increase in rental costs, creating a barrier to housing for low- and middle-income households. 43.62% of Washington County rental households and 44.62% of Morgan County rental households spend more than 30% of their household income on rental costs. 15% of those on HUD Section 8 Vouchers have more than 40% rent burden. In addition to the rising rent prices, our clients struggle finding landlords who will accept a HUD voucher especially if the family needs 3 or more bedrooms.

In Washington and Morgan Counties approximately 60% of all housing units were built prior to 1980. In order to preserve existing housing stock, these aging units require regular maintenance and repair. The recent increase in construction costs and lack of construction tradesman has led to low- and middle-income homeowners deferring necessary home repairs. In addition to homeowners not being able to afford home repairs, landlords are faced with rising costs that directly impacts their rental rates. As a private landlord ourselves, the cost of maintenance, repairs, insurance etc. make it difficult for us to provide affordable rental units.

The issue of affordable housing is multi-faceted and solutions are needed to continue to address the variety of needs of our communities. Rural communities have their own unique characteristics that do not always fall within the urban driven policy models. There are strategies that we have worked with federal, state and local agencies on to meet housing needs including:

- 1) Rehab programs such as the Community Housing Impact and Preservation Program (CHIP), Lead Safe Ohio, Housing Assistance Grant (HAG) and the Home Weatherization Program (HWAP). These programs have enabled low- and moderate-income households to access assistance with making emergency repairs, handicap accessibility improvements, substantial rehabilitation measures and energy improvements.
- 2) Rental and utility program including the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program, Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP), Low Income Water Assistance Program (LIWAP) and the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG). These programs provide financial assistance for utility costs and rental subsidies that are essential for low-income households. Additional funding for ESG program would allow for more families to be served and provided access to a case manager in order to remain stably housed.

While tax credits are part of the solution to the affordable housing shortage, policy changes which would reduce the soft costs involved would help reduce the overall cost of projects. Greater direct public investment in projects is needed to reduce the cost of construction or rehabilitation of units aimed at providing actually affordable units. There are a number of tenants in tax credit properties that require a HUD subsidized voucher in order to rent the apartment. Even tenants living in HTC units often must turn to Section 8 vouchers or other rental assistance programs to make their rent affordable.

In conclusion, affordable housing continues to be a pressing need in Washington and Morgan Counties, as well as the rest of Ohio. While there are programs currently in place to address some of the barriers, continued investment and focus is needed to eliminate the barriers to housing that Ohioans face. Affordable safe housing is the first priority for families on their journey to self-sufficiency.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to testify on affordable housing issues and I look forward to speaking to you in the future to answer any questions you may have.