

Chair Reynolds and members of the Senate Select Committee on Housing, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony that may be helpful as you investigate potential solutions to Ohio's housing affordability crisis. My name is Julie Bolen, executive director of Ross County Community Action and chair of the Ross County Continuum of Care. We have directly witnessed the increase in homelessness and the housing crisis in our community. We have tried to be creative and innovative in our attempts to remedy the situation over the last few years. I would like to share some of these experiences and insight into the needs related to homelessness and housing in our rural community.

Prior to the pandemic, our organization operated a 10 bed men's emergency shelter in Chillicothe. In March 2020 we started to experience a significant increase in contacts from individuals experiencing homelessness and needing housing. We worked with community partners to establish a quarantine facility for homeless individuals and then later began work to open a 50-bed homeless shelter to accommodate the needs. Since we opened the 50-bed shelter in January 2022, we had to increase capacity to 70 beds to meet the demand for shelter. We also had to move and relocate the shelter to 3 different locations due to challenges related to zoning codes and funding. These challenges ultimately forced us to close the shelter in April of this year. The data and outcomes from this 16-month shelter project were very insightful into the needs of our unsheltered population.

During the 16-month project, we served 482 unduplicated individuals from 434 households, guests of the shelter ranged in age from 17 days old to 72 years old. Out of the 482 guests, 150 were identified as chronically homeless. The shelter was in Ross County but helped address a regional need by serving individuals from over 20 different counties across the state of Ohio. The length of stay at the shelter varied but we had several guests that resided at the shelter from the day we opened to the day we closed 16 months later. This is a direct result of insufficient housing.

Many of the shelter guests were employed and earning an income yet unable to find rentals that were available and if available they were not affordable. Some individuals had prior evictions or felonies on their records which automatically made them ineligible to rent from some landlords. For example, we had a client who received notice that her rent was increasing from \$400/ month to \$800/month. She could not afford this increase on her fixed income of \$900/ month. She was eventually evicted. She is now unhoused and has further barriers to finding a home because of her eviction. We also had another shelter guest who was working at a local manufacturing company. He was earning a self-sufficient wage of \$30/per hour but had a prior felony on his record which was preventing him from finding a place to rent. Every one of these individuals staying in our shelter had an opportunity to be placed in the rapid rehousing program but the lack of affordable rentals or rentals that could pass the HUD inspections made it extremely difficult to place anyone in permanent housing.

We also had many situations where supportive housing would be more appropriate to serve their needs, such as senior housing, assisted living, mental health housing/group homes, permanent supportive housing, or transitional housing such as substance use recovery housing or housing for the reentry population. Options for supportive housing are scarce in our region.

The shelter served as a critical resource but was only as a very short-term solution. We have partnered with the Ross County Commissioners and the City of Chillicothe to purchase a permanent location to set up another emergency homeless shelter. While we are thrilled to be able to open another facility in the upcoming weeks, we know that financially sustaining this operation year-round will be an extreme challenge. The previous shelter cost over \$1 million dollars in funding and in-kind donations to operate

for just 16 months. There are insufficient funds available to operate homeless shelters long term. And it would make sense to invest resources into the development of permanent housing solutions. In just a few weeks we will have 50 sleeping cots and portable cribs set up in a large room to accommodate families and children currently without homes. We will be at capacity and will probably need to turn people away. They will spend the holidays at the shelter. And they will all be thankful to have a roof over their head because it's better than sleeping in a tent or in a car.

We need funding for home repairs and renovation along with development of affordable housing, which also includes supportive housing for special populations. However, renovation and development will take time. Therefore, funding is also needed to address the critical and immediate need of safe shelter and supportive services to serve those currently unhoused.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions.