

Ohio Senate Select Committee on Housing

Testimony

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Thank you Chair Reynolds and Vice-Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Craig and other members of this committee for taking the time to come to Southeastern Ohio to take testimony on what is certainly an important topic.

I am Robin Bozian and I am the chair of the Washington County Homeless Project. We operate a Drop-In Center that provides services to homeless or at risk of homelessness individuals in Washington County six days a week. Over a 10 month period, we served over 120 unduplicated individuals with meals, showers, laundry services and assistance in obtaining housing, benefits, employment, referral to mental health or medical treatment as necessary, referrals for substance use treatment if needed, and work to address other barriers that might impede personal stability.

Many of the folks we work with continue to live in tents, in alleys, in cars and trailers without electricity or water while seeking housing. Washington County does not have a homeless shelter to provide overnight stays. We are working with local officials to try and fill that gap but funding is always an issue and there are no dedicated funds to assist in that effort. The homeless are forced to compete with so many others for the scarce funds that are available.

We work hard to assist the folks coming to our center in obtaining housing but it is extremely difficult because there is a severe lack of affordable housing. There is a long wait for assistance with rapid rehousing (up to 6 weeks) which would help with deposits and 3 months rent. There is an even longer wait for vouchers that would subsidize housing for those with limited income. Some of the folks we work with have income to support a rental. Some of the folks are veterans who are proud and reluctant to seek help. Even when the person has rent or a voucher, the problem remains that there is simply not enough affordable housing available. We are working with someone right now who has a voucher and is still looking after 5 months.

I know that Washington County is not alone with this challenge. Affordable housing is a problem throughout rural Ohio. You have heard from my friend, Peggy Lee, Senior Staff Attorney with Southeastern Ohio Legal Services, who pointed out that studies have documented that there are only 40 affordable units for every 100 households. Ms. Lee also testified that not only is there a scarcity of housing but much of the “affordable housing” is simply substandard. I also have seen this first hand – one of our folks currently pays rent to an individual but does not have access to a bathroom, electricity or heat – the \$200 he pays simply guarantees him a place to sleep away from the elements. Another individual works for a business that allows him to sleep on the floor at night – but his pay is reduced by \$100 a week because they allow him to sleep there. A lot of the individuals we serve are easy to take advantage of because they are

desperate, cold and without options. We continue to work with these folks to obtain better housing but it is not easy or quick. Housing is in almost every instance the key to forward progress. Imagine how difficult it would be to maintain employment if you do not have a place to sleep, shower or have a closet of clean clothes. Imagine how difficult it would be to follow through with medical or mental health or substance use treatment if you are spending a lot of your time wondering where you will sleep tonight. Housing first should be a priority throughout Ohio. Ohio must take steps to help communities meet these challenges.

Ohio should make it easier for private developers to access tax credits to meet this need. Communities should be given access to funds to further develop housing opportunities. Perhaps a portion of the drug settlement money could be spent on developing affordable housing. This would certainly be justified as the folks who have completed rehabilitation are often the hardest to assist in obtaining housing. They often are single, non-elderly adults with problematic pasts.

There are models out there that document the success when there is a focus on housing. Nicholas Kristoff wrote an opinion piece in the New York Times detailing the success that Houston, Texas had in reducing homelessness by 60%. As he discovered, bringing agencies together to work in unison and putting money into the development of apartments and housing was the key to success, see Nicholas Kristof, New York Times, 11/22/2023. The wonderful thing about rural Appalachian Ohio is that the agencies already collaborate out of necessity, all that is needed is the development of housing.

Thank you for your time in hearing the testimony today.