

**INTEREST PARTY TESTIMONY**

**HB 96**

**OHIO SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE**

**MAY 29, 2025**

**JOHN LITTEN**

**PRESIDENT/CEO**

**GREATER CLEVELAND HABITAT FOR HUMANITY**

Hello Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is John Litten, and I'm blessed to be the President/CEO of Greater Cleveland Habitat for Humanity. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. Greater Cleveland Habitat serves Cuyahoga and Lorain counties and has helped over 350 families become homeowners since 1987, through our unique 0% interest mortgage program, which also requires families to complete volunteer hours to prepare them for homeownership.

As you likely know, Habitat for Humanity is one of the largest homebuilders in the nation, and Ohio is one of Habitat's top-producing states in the country. This is in no small part thanks to the Ohio Senate passing \$25 million in Ohio ARPA funds to support Habitat for Humanity throughout Ohio in early 2023. Over the last two years, that funding has had the desired effect, nearly doubling the production of Habitat throughout Ohio. We've shown that we can be trusted with your investment to build more new homes and preserve more existing homes through our critical home repair programs. We're incredibly grateful for that support.

However, there is more to do. We all know our lack of housing supply is one of the biggest issues facing our state and nation today. Data provided by the bipartisan Ohio Senate Select Committee on Housing demonstrates major concerns regarding housing costs. Many of you participated in that committee, which showed that there has been an 82.4% increase in the median listing price on homes in Ohio from 2016-2023, and a 72.4% decrease in the number of homes on the MLS's active listing count in that same timeframe. As the supply has decreased, the costs have drastically increased. Without intervention, the problem will only get worse.

Luckily, the Ohio Legislature already has two major programs that support housing throughout the State. I'm here to voice Greater Cleveland Habitat's strong support for these programs. They are Welcome Home Ohio and the Ohio Housing Trust Fund.

First, I want to thank the Ohio Senate for the passage of the Welcome Home Ohio (WHO) Program in the last budget. This unique program greatly advances the supply of starter homes for families throughout Ohio, increasing homeownership opportunities for working families. The last budget included \$100 million in grant funding for Welcome Home Ohio, which provides funding for new construction, full vacant home rehabs, and acquisition of property for new homeownership opportunities. It's a great program, but it's in need of a few tweaks to remove bureaucracy so the funding can be better utilized.

I'm happy to say that the Ohio House's proposed budget includes these changes to better utilize the Welcome Home Ohio Program. These changes are supported by a coalition of housing organizations, including Habitat for Humanity. With these changes that remove bureaucracy, provide greater funding flexibility, and make more nonprofits including Habitat for Humanity eligible to receive the funding, this program is sure to significantly increase homeownership opportunities for Ohioans, particularly for starter homes. Additionally, the House's proposed budget includes over \$90 million in new funding for this important program. We appreciate the House's prioritization of homeownership and are aligned with their support for Welcome Home Ohio.

However, the House's budget did include unnecessary changes to another housing program: The Ohio Housing Trust Fund (OHTF). The Housing Trust Fund has been incredibly successful for over 20 years. It supports home repairs, the development of affordable rental units, critical homelessness prevention services, and other essential housing services, particularly important to rural areas. It also supports some homeownership and critical home repair programs, including Habitat for Humanity's.

The House's version effectively proposes to eliminate the Trust Fund by no longer requiring county recorder fees to be allocated to the OHTF. This would be detrimental to the housing programs I just mentioned. Instead, the House proposal would require counties to allocate the funds from recorder fees to their own housing programs. Most, if not all, counties also do not have the systems or programs in place to utilize these funds. Essentially, the House's proposal would create 88 levels of bureaucracy and deviate from a program with proven results. It would also place an undue burden on local counties to create new housing programs instead of utilizing the state program that has been successful for over two decades.

The current program works and works well, while the House's proposal would create an unnecessary sudden change at a time when support for housing is most crucial. Let's stick to what works: preserve the Ohio Housing Trust Fund.

Again, Habitat for Humanity is incredibly grateful for the support the state of Ohio has provided in recent years. State ARPA funds have done exactly what they were supposed to, nearly doubling our Habitat affiliates' production throughout Ohio, impacting both rural and urban communities.

In Cleveland, this funding was an important catalyst for our 400-Home Initiative, in which we are helping 400 Northeast Ohio families in concentrated neighborhoods with new homeownership opportunities or home repairs from 2023-2027. This is essential as demand for our program is the highest it has ever been.

The funding has also allowed us to innovate with new housing solutions including modular homes. These homes can be completed in a few short months. We've installed 15 modular homes in multiple Cleveland neighborhoods in the last year, and are a leader in Cleveland's modular pilot program to bring a manufacturer to the city, in order to dramatically increase our housing supply.

We've also expanded our workforce development initiatives, working with students in the trades. We've continued our Building Great Futures Program, a collaboration with many great organizations including Y.O.U. We've also started a new initiative with Oakmont Education, working with their workforce development program to give students hands-on experience at construction sites. These programs are just a couple examples of how housing creates jobs and builds Ohio's economy.

Housing provides a foundation for Ohio's families. I can't say it any better than Naomi, a Habitat homebuyer, who said this at her dedication: "This is the green light that I needed. Even though I did not have a great year, this has been my light at the end of the tunnel." Her story is like that of many Habitat homebuyers, and many other families in Northeast Ohio. Many are struggling, but simply need a light at the end of the tunnel to strive for. Safe and affordable housing is that light.

Welcome Home Ohio and The Ohio Housing Trust Fund are essential programs that can provide that light to thousands of Ohioans. We appreciate the Senate's support of these programs in past budgets and strongly encourage you to once again provide this essential funding for Ohioans.

Thanks again for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions you have.