



Senate Finance Committee
House Bill 96
Larry Fisher, Executive Director
Appalachian Center for Economic Networks
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Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Larry Fisher, and I am the executive director of The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks or ACEnet, a 40 year –old community economic development organization based in Athens County Ohio. Our mission is to grow our regional economy by supporting entrepreneurs and strengthening economic business sectors. Our staff accomplishes this mission by partnering with regional microenterprise and development practitioners to create a healthy local economy, allowing opportunity for all residents to start businesses, obtain quality jobs, and connect with other entrepreneurs for mutual benefit. Included in our client base are persons trying to leave poverty and or those who are returning to our region from places of incarceration or recovery facilities.

A great example of this work can be found in the success of our workforce program that has provided several former residents of a reentry justice program with job training and job placement in Athens and Meigs counties. This program began when I was working with other partners in the Portsmouth area and was told, as we were walking down the street, that 25% of the people we were passing would have a felony conviction and that the struggle for finding jobs and housing was very real. This “fact” opened my eyes of the need to focus some of our programs on helping this part of our community become entrepreneurs, potential employees within our economic sectors, and contributors to our economy.

Today, one of the greatest challenges we find in working in these program areas, is the lack of affordable housing units for our clients. Too many find themselves on the couches of friends or family. Or if they have scrapped enough funds together, they may have their own car in which they live. This is why I speak in favor of restoring the Ohio Housing Trust Fund. While our organization is not directly involved in creating housing units, we work directly with communities and clients in our region who are struggling with the lack of affordable housing.

The Ohio Housing Trust Fund is a valuable tool to address Ohio’s critical housing need, and it is especially important for Ohio’s rural communities as state law requires that half of the funding be awarded to rural areas. Ohio’s Appalachian region has ample room for additional community development, but we are restrained by a lack of housing options. Rural communities must have housing stock if they are to grow and prosper.

Please support an amendment to remove House changes to the program and consider adding additional resources to this critical program. Safeguarding this fund ensures greater stability for funding to ensure Ohio has the ability to address housing instability.