

Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee
Thomas E. Andrews, Chief Executive Officer
Community Action Agency of Columbiana County, Inc.
May 14, 2025

Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Weinstein, and Members of the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Tom Andrews, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Community Action Agency of Columbiana County, Inc.. I am here to express opposition to a provision added by the Ohio House of Representatives to House Bill 96 that would significantly weaken the Ohio Housing Trust Fund (OHTF).

Who is OPAE?

The Community Action Agency of Columbiana County, Inc. is a member of Ohio Partners for Affordable Energy (OPAE). OPAE is a non-profit organization that advocates for affordable utility rates and provides energy efficiency services and bill payment assistance to the most vulnerable families in Ohio. Many of OPAE's members are Community Action Agencies like mine. Under the federal legislation authorizing the creation and funding of these agencies, originally known as the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Community Action Agencies are charged with advocating for low-income residents of their communities. OPAE advocates at the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (the "Commission") as well as here at the statehouse for the benefit of low-income residential and small commercial utility customers. We are regularly involved in gas and electric cases at the Commission. OPAE and its member agencies have been managing and delivering weatherization and energy efficiency services for Ohio's utilities since the mid-1980s. These programs are proven to save our clients and ratepayers money.

Ohio Housing Trust Fund

Today, I ask that the Ohio Senate remove a House-added provision to HB 96 that removes the requirement for the designated share of Low- and Moderate-Income Housing Trust Fund (Fund 6460) fees collected by county recorders to be deposited into the statewide Ohio Housing Trust Fund. Instead, it would allow each county to use these funds as determined by its board of commissioners. This is item DEVCD57 in the LSC Comparison Document.

By way of background, the Ohio Housing Trust Fund (OHTF) is the state's primary funding source for affordable housing and homelessness prevention programs. It provides critical support to low-income families, seniors, veterans, and individuals with disabilities by funding the development, rehabilitation, and maintenance of safe and affordable housing. The Trust Fund is important because it helps stabilize communities, reduces homelessness, and promotes economic security for Ohio's most vulnerable residents, ensuring everyone has access to a safe and stable place to live.

Why the OHTF is important to rural counties

The Trust Fund isn't just a policy—it's a lifeline. For example, the Community Action Agency of Columbiana County, Inc., relies on the OHTF to:

1. Provide an average of 100 individuals annually with emergency housing at their 11-bed homeless shelter;
2. Deliver health and safety home repairs for low-income households;
3. Maintain two shelters in their rural county, where resources are already scarce; and
4. Utilizing the Homeless Crisis Response Program (HCRP) to provide to rental assistance to families that would otherwise face homelessness throughout the five-county area. (Columbiana, Jefferson, Tuscarawas, Carroll and Harrison)

These are real services for real people—made possible through a coordinated, statewide effort that ensures equitable access to support, regardless of a county's size or capacity.

Why this provision should be removed

This proposal represents a major step backward. It would dismantle a proven and effective statewide tool for addressing homelessness and the shortage of affordable housing. It inserts new layers of bureaucracy in all 88 counties, creating administrative burdens that will reduce the efficiency and impact of housing programs. It would severely undermine our ability to leverage other federal, state, and private investments that depend on coordinated funding through the OHTF.

This amendment was inserted into the budget without any public debate or discussion. It creates deep uncertainty about how, or even if, these funds would continue to be used to support low-income housing and homelessness services. There is no requirement in the amendment that counties must continue to use the funds for these purposes.

Ohio's Affordable Housing Crisis

Every community in Ohio—rural, suburban, and urban—is grappling with an affordable housing crisis. However, the solution is not to fragment our response, but to strengthen it. The OHTF has been the cornerstone of Ohio's effort to ensure vulnerable Ohioans can find and keep safe, stable housing. From rapid rehousing and emergency home repairs to accessibility modifications and supportive housing, the OHTF touches lives across the state every day.

Solving Ohio's affordable housing crisis requires a thoughtful approach, to include statewide coordination rather than a county-by-county patchwork that this House-added provision would move toward. This patchwork would pit bigger counties against smaller ones in the allocation of resources that are needed to address the state's affordable housing needs. State oversight of the OHTF dollars is essential to ensuring that funding reaches underserved rural areas, many of which lack even basic emergency shelter infrastructure—like Columbiana County.

What is the solution?

Instead of disrupting a system that has worked efficiently since its creation in 2003, Ohio should be stabilizing and expanding the Trust Fund to meet growing need. The Home Matters to Ohio coalition has wisely recommended a pause and a careful study of the issue—bringing all stakeholders together to evaluate the best way forward. OPAGE wholeheartedly supports that approach.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I urge this committee to reject the House's amendment to House Bill 96 that threatens the future of the Ohio Housing Trust Fund. Let's not jeopardize critical support for Ohio's most vulnerable citizens. Let us instead work together to strengthen and modernize the OHTF with input from all corners of our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.