

Subcommittee on Housing and Insurance
“The Future of Housing in America: Federal Housing Reforms that Create Housing Opportunity”
October 21, 2015 at 2:00 PM
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2128
Testimony submitted by Evelyn E. Craig

Good afternoon. I am President and CEO of reStart, Inc., a housing and service provider in Kansas City, Missouri, that served 24,504 unduplicated persons in 2014, including 9,243 children and youth. reStart, Inc. is committed to evidence-based practices to end homelessness. In recent years, this has meant decisively and rapidly shifting towards a preference for permanent housing, dropping barriers to serve those that are chronically homeless, and prioritizing attention to those most in need. I also serve as President of the Board of reStart Housing Services, the owner-operator of 14 units of permanent supportive housing for youth that have aged out of foster care in Jackson County and have a mental health disability. I am a Past Chair of the Jackson County, Missouri, HUD Continuum of Care, currently serve on its Executive Committee and am Co-Chair of both the Continuum’s Point in Time and Permanent Housing Committees. Implementation of H.R. 3700 would make many long overdue changes to the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s core rental assistance programs, including creating more flexible options to encourage Public Housing Authorities to expand access to housing for homeless youth and young adults, families and Veterans. Perhaps the most transformational impact of those changes will be to break down the silos that currently exist in too many communities between homeless service providers, the people they serve, and local housing authorities. In some communities, exceptional collaborations are in place between these partners, but those are the exception and that means that too many of our nation’s homeless households – including unaccompanied youth and young adults – are on waiting lists that are at least a decade long for the resource that is fundamental to individual and community development: stable permanent housing.

The proposed legislation will expand the Family Unification Program (FUP) to make it a more effective housing resource available to young adults who have been involved with the foster care system. Why is there a need for a housing solution just for these young people? Young adults are a vulnerable population and those that are aging out of foster care face additional challenges as they move into adulthood. More than 800 young adults aged out of the foster care system just in Jackson County in 2013, the last full year for when statistics are available, but there are only 300 approved foster homes. Nationally, more than 20 percent of those who age out become homeless; only 58 percent graduate from high school by age 19; by age 20, one in four is involved in the criminal justice system; and by age 24, half are unemployed. If we can provide secure housing and support to transition-aged youth in our nation, we can change the course of their lives and of our nation’s future.

The following policy changes that would be implemented by H.R. 3700 increase significantly the ability for young adults, especially those aging out of foster care, to get access to permanent housing: extending the age eligibility for FUP vouchers that serve young adults leaving care from 21 to 24; extending the rental assistance for youth receiving FUP vouchers from 18 to 36 months; allowing FUP voucher assistance to begin 90 days prior to a young adult leaving foster care; including language requiring HUD and HHS to issue joint guidance to both PHAs and Public Child Welfare Agencies on how to improve the referral process, identify eligible recipients, and align program goals; and allowing PHA’s to issue project-based FUP vouchers Targeting young adults under the McKinney-Vento Continuum of Care. States exercise local control over critical benchmarks for children and youth in foster care, including whether they age out at 18 or 21 and whether or not a discharge plan must include the most appropriate housing option. The changes proposed in H.R. 3700 provide specific housing supports for a highly vulnerable

population and also encourages more effective collaboration between federal agencies that are entrusted with their care.

H. R. 3700 would also implement much-needed revisions in tenant protection guidelines in voucher programs particularly for families. Kansas City ranks among the top 10 major U.S. metropolitan areas for family evictions. According to research conducted by Dr. Matthew Desmond, Associate Professor of Sociology and Social Studies at Harvard University, 19 families a day are formally evicted in Kansas City. The consequences of eviction are dire. In addition to losing your home, finding a new one is extremely difficult with an eviction on your record. With more time and communications among community service and housing providers, families facing evictions can be quickly offered resources to either meet their obligations or find a more suitable home. H.R. 3700 would significantly expand affordable and accessible permanent housing opportunities for families by allowing public housing agencies to use up to an additional 10 percent of authorized units for project-based assistance for households that meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness. This would create a direct route for homeless families to public housing assistance that does not now exist and could dramatically reduce the amount of time a family experiences homelessness.

Over the past several years, silos have been eliminated between homeless service providers, homeless Veterans, and the Department of Veterans Affairs; as a result, communities across our country are reporting that they will achieve the federal goal of bringing Veteran homelessness to functional zero by the end of this year. By breaking down the silos between our federal affordable housing providers and local homeless service providers, we will have taken a huge step towards ending homelessness among youth, young adults and families – possibly before the 2020 deadline set forth in Opening Doors, the federal strategic plan to end homelessness.

The message to too many of our youth is that if they stay homeless long enough, they may get housing just in time to die. We can do better, but we cannot do so in a consistent and sustainable national system without many of the tools that H.R. 3700 provides. Thank you for the opportunity to express my support for legislation that can change the future of our nation.