

TESTIMONY OF GLORIA J. ROBINSON
ONE DC TENANT ORGANIZER
&
HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER HOLDER

Thank you, Chairwoman Waters, Ranking member Capito and Members of the committee for inviting me to testify on a draft of the Section Eight Voucher Reform Act (SEVRA).

My name is Gloria Robinson and I work for Organizing Neighborhood Equity DC or ONE DC, which is a member of the National People's Action Network. I'm also a Housing Choice Voucher holder.

In the past year there has been a great deal of dialogue about the ailing economy, the housing and mortgage crisis and its devastating affects on Middle America. I am pleased to be a part of a dialogue that addresses another population; a population that often seems to exist beneath the radar screens of lawmakers and politicians.

This is a population for which little has changed as a result of the economic downturn and the mortgage and foreclosure crisis. They've been dirt poor and living in substandard housing or homeless way before this conversation began to take place!

For a very long time I was part of this population. In 1994 I left an abusive marriage and entered a transitional housing program. I was unemployed at the time and my name was placed on the "waiting list" for public and/or subsidized housing.

Fifteen years later, I have still yet to receive the letter informing me that my name had reached the top of that list! It is my understanding that the DC Housing Authority has over 26,000 households "waiting". That number is growing steadily with no significant decrease expected in the foreseeable future. Without the 750,000 vouchers proposed by SEVRA over the next five years, they will continue to wait. They will wait in sub-standard housing and they will wait on the streets. Some of them will continue to bear the enormous burden paying more than 30% of their incomes for rent. I can only imagine what the numbers are like nationally. It is essential that SEVRA gets introduced and passed through the House with this provision in place.

I became a Housing Choice Voucher holder in June of 2008, not because of any movement on the waiting list but because there was an Opt-out at the project-based subsidized property where I was renting.

I've been employed at ONE DC for over 14 years, primarily as a tenant organizer working with poor, working poor and homeless families and individuals and many of them have not been so fortunate in their search for affordable housing. Over 2000 affordable housing units have been lost since 2000 in DC alone and the rent burden carried by thousands of low-income tenants continues to grow. For this reason, I applaud the

proposal to increase the number of vouchers made available and the continued funding for the current Housing Choice Vouchers.

Of major concern to me and other low-income tenants is the sometimes prohibitive background checks required of voucher applicants. For example, outstanding or delinquent student loans will negatively affect an applicant's credit score. Often these debts are decades old but their negative impact is current. Generally, low-income people are going to have weaker credit histories because the reality is it's more expensive to be poor in this country. For that reason an applicant's credit history shouldn't be taken into consideration when they apply for a voucher unless there is overwhelming evidence that they will not be able to pay rent.

DC's Housing Authority requires criminal background checks for all household members over the age of 18. This could prevent some applicants from being deemed eligible for subsidized housing and it could also hamper the reunification of families after a member has successfully completed his or her sentence. Any policy that prevents families from living together under the same roof is in direct conflict with traditional American Family Values. I would like to see SEVRA include language that limits criminal background checks to certain felonies that have occurred within the past two years. Certain drug felonies and violent crimes like rape, child molestation and murder should be the extent of what housing authorities screen for.

One of the things I personally experienced while searching for a place to use the Housing Choice Voucher was being told out outright by landlords and property owners that they do not accept Housing Choice Vouchers. Although there are laws that are supposed to protect tenants from being discriminated against based on the source of income, this is a widespread practice in DC even though the District passed a law prohibiting it. There needs to be a provision added to SEVRA that expressly prohibits discrimination based on source of income at the national level. There also needs to be mechanisms put in place to enforce this provision. I believe that discrimination based on income is no different than any other Fair Housing violation.

I am happy that SEVRA addresses the issue of inspections, especially failed inspections that result in delayed lease-ups when there are no life-threatening reasons for the failure. I understand the importance of the inspections. They are supposed to make sure that only safe, decent housing is subsidized.

When I finally located an apartment community that I wanted to call home and that would accept the Voucher, I was approved immediately (August 2nd) I submitted the 30 day notice at my previous apartment the following week. The management there began accepting applications for the apartment almost right away. Meanwhile, I began the waiting again, this time for the Housing Authority to inspect my unit.

About 7 weeks later, the inspection was done and the unit failed (the first time) for one bedroom window that had been painted shut then (the second time) for a shower pole missing in the master bathroom. Not life threatening! Each time the unit failed it went to the end of the inspection list! My apartment complex was about 2 years old and excellently maintained and managed,

I called repeatedly (with no answers or return calls) and I visited the Housing Authority every Tuesday, which is the only walk-in day for clients. Sometimes I was told that my unit was the next on the list, to later find out that it wasn't true. Once I was told by a very rude employee that they were backlogged and I needed to wait; she had no idea how long!

While housing authorities should withhold rents from landlords that don't make necessary repairs within 30 days, non life threatening issues should not delay the occupancy of an otherwise habitable unit!

I was finally able to lease up and move in on November 3, 2008, after sitting in overflowing waiting rooms every week, sometimes from 7:30 until 3:00 pm before ever speaking with a client placement representative. Every employed housing authority client doesn't have the luxury or flexibility to spend 6-8 hours away from their jobs every week without seriously jeopardizing their employment status.

Finally, I agree with Secretary Donovan's opinion on the Moving-to-Work program. Because Housing Authorities were not required to collect any data, there is no empirical evidence to show the program has been effective. Extensive data needs to be collected, and that data thoroughly analyzed before the program is expanded.

If Moving-to-Work is expanded, then there MUST be restrictions placed on the Housing Authorities that protect tenants. Housing Authorities MUST NOT be allowed to place time-limits on vouchers. I also do not believe that Housing Authorities should be allowed to place work requirements on voucher holders. Also under Moving-to-Work, Housing Authorities are not required to spend all of their money allocated for vouchers. Essentially Housing Authorities are allowed to stockpile money. The only thing I can say is "That Ain't Right!" Every dollar that Housing Authorities are allowed to stockpile is a dollar that can be used to help low-income families find a decent home. And finally, Housing Authorities should NOT be allowed to recalculate rent payments under Moving-to-Work. Voucher holders should not have to pay more than 33% of their income towards rent. The whole idea behind affordable housing is that people would pay no more than a third of their monthly net income on housing.

It is my hope that SEVRA will effectively streamline the administration of the Housing Choice Voucher Program, while protecting the rights of low-income tenants and increasing the availability of safe, decent affordable housing for those most in need of it.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of the Section Eight Voucher Reform Act.