

Housing & Community Opportunity Subcommittee
March 25, 2006
Jackson-Vinton Community Action, Inc.
Cheryl Thiessen, Executive Director

I appreciate this opportunity to testify today. I am Cheryl Thiessen, Executive Director of Jackson-Vinton Community Action. Our agency serves the counties of Jackson (pop. 32,641) and Vinton (pop. 12,806) which are two small, rural, counties in the southeastern part of Ohio.

Our agency has provided services for over forty years and we strive to address the needs of the low-income families and individuals in our community. With shrinking resources and growing need due to tough economic hardships, including high unemployment, low skilled labor and higher cost of living, many of our families struggle daily to meet their basic needs.

Our agency provides a wide range of services to the poorest of the poor in our community through our Head Start Program, Home Weatherization Assistance Program (HWAP), Emergency HEAP, Ohio Works First and Enhanced Medicaid Transportation Services, and the Ohio Housing Trust Fund - Homelessness Prevention and Emergency Home Repair Programs.

We also operate a Health Clinic offering a sliding fee scale to ensure basic medical care is provided with funding through our Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) and a school-based Dental Sealant Program to 2nd and 6th grade students in the Vinton County and all three of the Jackson County School Districts and nutritional counseling and vouchers for nutritional foods through our Jackson County - WIC Program.

Since 1998 our agency has been involved in construction of Single-Family Housing as defined by HUD's definition for low-income households. In 2001 we were successful in securing a three year Rural Housing and Economic Development (RHED) Grant for \$150,000 and in 2004 we secured a second three year grant for an additional \$150,000 for increasing our staff capacity in housing and economic development activities. We currently have two full time staff in our housing department that is funded in part with the RHED funding. The role of the staff is to work with local entities to improve the housing quality within Jackson and Vinton counties and promote homeownership opportunities to low-income families by providing education and information on the various programs so they can achieve the "American Dream."

We provide emergency home repairs to low-income homeowners, the majority of these being elderly households. We work closely with local entities such as CHIP, USDA-Rural Development, Habitat for Humanity and the Ohio Department of Development. Utilizing HUD resources we provide counseling for credit issues, including budgeting and resolving outstanding debt. We provide counseling on Predatory Lending, and selection of a Lender. We also instruct the families on the importance of Home Maintenance and other housing related issues. Since 1998, our agency has constructed eighteen single-family houses and currently have five units in progress. We provide economic development opportunities by utilizing local vendors and contractors for the emergency home repairs and construction of our housing units.

Since being certified in 1993, by the State of Ohio, as a Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO) we have access to funding targeted to rural areas. However many of the grants do not provide administrative or operational funding to support the staff while completing the projects (i.e. our HDAP Grant). Without funding such as the Rural Housing and Economic

Community Development Block Grant Testimony
Thiessen Page 2

Development Program our agency would not be able to sustain our Housing Staff or complete the projects as we have in the past.

In 2004, we submitted an application for \$55,000 to the Jackson County Commissioners for funding through the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program for a waterline that would supply six low-income families along Dan T. Davis Road outside the Village of Oak Hill, Ohio and the houses in our project funded by the Ohio Department of Development – Housing Development Assistance Program. Our project, a ten unit single-family, stick built, subdivision marketed to families at 52%-73% (AMI) was currently under construction. Without a water supply from an approved source by the Ohio EPA our subdivision would be stalled.

We contacted several resources to assist with the funding needed for the waterline project on Dan T. Davis Road. However, most resources, such as USDA Rural Development, Ohio Valley Regional Development Commission and Economic Development Revolving Loan Program that offered funds for water or sewer, had regulations connected to economic development and increase in jobs or retention of jobs. Some of the other resources such as the local Community Housing Improvement Programs (CHIP) were already earmarked for other areas in the county.

With the current flexibility of the Community Development Block Grant the Jackson County Commissioners were able to fund a total of four projects for various activities. This included nearly \$50,000 for the waterline for our subdivision, with our agency covering the balance of the cost. The Jackson County Commissioners also assisted the Village of Oak Hill with funds for extension of their sewer system, Jackson Co. Rural Water Co. for a pumping station which served low-income families in the rural area and another small project within the county.

In a rural community with no public transit system, substandard housing stock, high unemployment, lack of healthcare coverage and a shortage of living wage jobs many of our families have limited choices as to where they are able to live. And if they have credit issues many of the public housing authorities are now doing credit checks and a family with any credit issues are denied affordable housing. Many of these changes would make the local resources have to compete against each for the funding, instead of working together as an alliance.

The needs of our low-income families are growing everyday. Many of our programs have long waiting lists such as our Emergency Home Repair and Weatherization Programs because the funding level is inadequate. We need to increase funding resources to increase affordable housing opportunities for low-income families, not reduce it. Many of the local resources are already stretched too thin. Our staff would be willing to set up a tour of our poorest communities so you can see first hand the conditions that many of our families are forced to live in.

I thank Congressman Ney and members of the Housing & Community Opportunity Subcommittee for their hard work and commitment to “Strengthening Rural Ohio: A review of the Community Development Block Grant Program.”

I am willing to clarify any comments of my testimony or answer any questions that you may have. My office number is (740) 384-3722 Ext. 11. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.