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Testimony Presented by:
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Columbus City Council

To the U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Housing & Community Opportunity
Congressman Robert Ney, Chairman
Martin Luther King, Jr. Performing & Cultural Arts Complex
Columbus, Ohio

Chairman Ney and members of the House Subcommittee on Housing & Community Opportunity, I am Charleta Tavares, Councilwoman for the City of Columbus, Ohio and Chair of the Health, Housing and Human Services Committee. I welcome you to my city and feel it is an honor and privilege to share our hospitality and experiences on housing and community development issues with this prestigious and expert body.

As Chair of Council's Housing Committee, I have worked with our Mayor, Michael Coleman, to focus attention on developing more affordable housing, increasing homeownership and revitalizing our older neighborhoods. We have developed a toolbox to help us in accomplishing these three goals. And, we have created partnerships to strengthen and sustain our efforts.

One of our tools was to create the Columbus/Franklin County Housing Trust Corporation. This partnership between the City and County enabled us to look at where affordable housing units were needed in our community (Franklin County) and to determine what kind of units were needed (i.e. apartments, single family, senior, etc.). In addition, we were able to pool our resources in order to better leverage our dollars and expand our partnerships to the public and private sectors. The Housing Trust Corporation has a three-part goal:

1. Increase the number of affordable housing units;
2. Increase homeownership opportunities and;
3. Strengthen and revitalize our older neighborhoods.

Increasing the number of affordable housing units is critical if we are going to provide opportunity and prevent homelessness among our individual and family residents. Ensuring we have safe, decent and affordable housing for all families in our community has largely depended upon the partnerships we have had with the federal government through the Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA).

General Section 8 Rental Assistance:

1. Federal housing subsidies have a dramatic impact on central cities. In order to ensure that the project-based Section 8 program continues to address the needs of our communities, we must support legislation which has been proposed that will allow for deconcentration / decentralization of the units to non-traditional areas of the city and county. This kind of initiative will help our city with revitalization efforts in our stressed and blighted neighborhoods and help to develop housing in the job growth areas of our outerbelt areas. I

believe that any redesign of the Section 8 voucher or project-based program should mitigate the tendency for concentration of subsidy units in the central city.

2. One of the barriers to participation in the Section 8 voucher and project-based program among the apartment and landlord communities is the dearth of paperwork and regulations. I believe it is important to provide uniformity and consistency in applications and tenant responsibilities in order to eliminate disparate treatment, two standards for application process and inefficient/ineffective program implementation.

Most landlords have opted out because of the cost of maintaining a duplicative program with burdensome rules and regulations. Additionally, it creates an unrealistic and separate system for people who are poor. This will continue to stigmatize the individual/family and cause resentment.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG):

1. The CDBG program has been effectively used to increase our supply of affordable housing, revitalize central city neighborhoods, strengthen our neighborhood and commercial strips, provide loans to create and expand small businesses and help low-income families maintain their homes.

All of these issues are critical to central cities and rural communities who are attempting to rehabilitate older housing stock, attract business development and eliminate blight and flight from the core city. The CDBG program has allowed communities to target the dollars where they are needed to leverage the dollars with the private and other public investments such as our Housing Trust and Home funds.

2. Our consolidated plan has been effectively used to target our resources where the need is the greatest and to spur activity to strengthen our neighborhoods. The Consolidated planning process has helped us to strategically align the dollars where they can address some of our most difficult challenges i.e. housing for very low-income and special populations (homeless,etc.). In the early 1990's Columbus made a major policy decision to allocate a greater share of CDBG funds to the housing needs of the lowest income. The impact of the decision was to develop more permanent supportive housing for the homeless.

The plan has been developed with our city's housing, planning, and development staff along with several consultants who aided us in engaging the community through committees, public forums, surveys and outreach activities. A draft plan is developed after all of the community input is gathered and public hearings are then scheduled to get additional feedback, comments and suggestions to the draft. We are currently gearing up to prepare a new plan and will once again look at how we can utilize our CDBG and Home funds to implement our neighborhood and community goals and objectives.

3. The City of Columbus and the County of Franklin have enjoyed a strong and effective relationship with our HUD partners. The CDBG program has been one of the most successful and sustainable programs of HUD. I believe the key to this success is that it is a local program. You have given us broad parameters and allowed each community to design the plan that best meets its own goals and neighborhood/city's needs. Do not change what has worked.

A state or regional administration would add another layer of: administrative expenses, monitoring and interpretation of regulations. Regional or state administration of the Entitlement CDBG would add negative dimensions of competition i.e., Suburban and Central City, urban versus rural, etc. The strength of this program is the partnership between HUD and its local partnering communities.

Housing Production:

1. Unfortunately, there is nowhere in America that a family/individual working a minimum wage job can afford a two bedroom apartment. Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, as you know, far too many of our children are growing up in single-parent households, many working minimum and low wage jobs who are one crisis, one paycheck away from homelessness.

We are fortunate in Columbus, Ohio in that our cost of living is well below our sister cities of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. However, we cannot forget that we have thousands of families in our community living below the poverty line...who are responsible, who are working and who cannot afford a clean, safe, and decent place to call home.

We have to do more. Our children and families are depending on us to ensure their most basic needs of food, clothing, housing and healthcare are met. We have a need in our great city for more housing units that are affordable. It is both a cost and production issue in our community.

2. Columbus is working hard to produce and decentralize our affordable housing units throughout the city. Many of our job centers are on the fringe areas of Columbus and in our neighboring municipalities. There are still very few affordable housing units in suburban areas. This is even more devastating without a light rail or public-transit corridor to get the families to the jobs that can move them up the economic ladder.

We have an increased demand for more affordable housing units because of our growth in population and in family size with the influx of new immigrants (Somali & Latino). We are also using an increasing amount of our HOME funds to preserve our older affordable housing units constructed with earlier federal subsidy programs such as Section 8 and Section 236.

3. Cities such as Columbus are experiencing the negative impacts of the withdrawal of federal support for affordable housing during the last twelve years. Public housing modernization programs such as HOPE VI have had positive impacts on our older neighborhoods. Many of our privately owned subsidized housing are now seeking local funding for similar modernization to supplement the meager replacement reserves allowed through the Mark-To-Market program. Unfortunately, this program is not a modernization program and consequently, older central city neighborhoods are stuck with continuing 20 and 30 year Section 8 units that need refinancing and major modernization.

HOME funds are an increasingly important source of revenue to help meet the demand for these efforts, however, they cannot meet the need nor offset the withdrawal of federal funds

for affordable housing. Local government even those of us who have developed other tools and strategies to address our affordable housing needs cannot generate enough money to compensate for the federal reductions.

In our experience, HOME funds alone are not adequate enough to develop enough units for very low and extremely low-income households. The developers who have attempted to assist us in producing more affordable housing for the very low income (below 50% AMI) must use multiple program dollars such as Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC), bond financing, and HOME funds to meet the rent levels. The low-income housing developers have maximized their use of LIHTC but need HOME funds to fill the gap. Our community could effectively and efficiently use additional HOME and CDBG funds to produce more affordable units as well as modernize and maintain existing units.

Chairman Ney and members of the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity, I am encouraging you to look at expanding the programs that have worked successfully in our community such as the CDBG, HOME and Low Income Housing Tax Credits. Additionally, I believe we should seriously look at opportunities to develop affordable housing strategies that decentralize units and encourage development in suburban and job growth areas. Our housing policy should reflect our values of opportunity, freedom and choice for our families and children.

We should promote strong neighborhoods where families can live, work, play and raise their families. And finally, we should ensure that we have housing options that meet our myriad of family needs. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my testimony with you. I would be happy to respond to any questions.