

Testimony of Joseph Puma for
National People's Action
before the
House Financial Services
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
Hearing on Public Housing
April 28, 2010

Thank you Chairwoman Waters and Ranking Member Capito and members of the Committee for inviting me today to speak about the need for America's public housing and the reforms necessary to make sure America's public housing is furthering the goal of providing all Americans with their human right to housing.

My name is Joseph Puma. I am a lifelong public housing resident and advocate for public housing in New York. It was over 25 years ago that my parents and I (just 1 year old at the time) moved into a newly opened public housing development in our community, the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a neighborhood where four generations of my family have called home. If it weren't for our public housing apartment, my mother would not have been able to provide for me and stay in our community later as a struggling, working single parent. And if it weren't for that upbringing in public housing, I would not have been able to become a first generation college graduate, earning a degree from Yale University. This foundation of family and community, of housing and education, have motivated me toward community involvement and public service. I have worked for the past several years for the New York City Office of Management and Budget, and I serve on the board of Good Old Lower East Side, a neighborhood preservation and eviction prevention organization.

I am here today representing National People's Action. National People's Action (NPA) is a network of community organizations from across the country that work to advance a national economic and racial justice agenda. NPA has over 200 organizers working to unite everyday people in cities, towns, and rural communities throughout the United States. NPA also coordinates and staffs the Housing Justice Movement (HJM), an alliance of more than 30 community and tenant organizations. HJM represents thousands of residents in America's public and subsidized housing who demand a voice in their housing and a voice in decisions that will affect their lives.

The public housing development where I grew up and those where many of my fellow residents around the country live are vibrant communities where neighbors help each other succeed and support each other. At least that is the case for those communities that are left. As good intentioned as many of the past public housing policies like HOPE VI may have been, they all too often have resulted in destruction of communities and the instability of housing. This has led to instability of employment, education and the health and well being of thousands of families.

I would first like to address the “Public Housing Preservation and Rehabilitation Act of 2010” as proposed by Congressman Frank. In particular, I would like to state our support for Section 4, which would lift the restrictions on using operating and capital funding for new public housing construction. As I will detail more below, the need for more affordable housing options is enormous, and any barriers that can be removed to meeting this need are welcome.

Section 2 of the proposed bill, Leveraging of Other Assistance, contains many good provisions to safeguard the capital fund loans and to encourage energy efficient practices and upgrades throughout Public Housing. We would encourage Congress to enact improvements to Section 3 of the Housing and Urban Development Act to ensure that residents are given the first opportunity to access jobs created through this proposal.

I would like to focus my testimony today on the Public Housing One-for-One Replacement and Tenant Protection Act of 2010, which will go a long way towards repairing the damage I refer to, and offer our suggestions for improving this excellent bill. I would like to thank you, Chairwoman Waters, for introducing this legislation and for consistently standing with us as we fight for our homes.

One-for-One Replacement

Since the inception of HOPE VI, over 155,000 units of America’s public housing have been destroyed with only 50,000 new units built to replace them. That represents hundreds of thousands of people displaced and many left homeless. But looking at those numbers alone only begins to scratch the surface of the need. There are over a million families on waiting lists for a unit or a voucher – and who knows how many more, with many waiting lists closed and not accepting more families. The big-bank-driven Great Recession and the record foreclosure crisis add even more urgency and remind us, again, that we cannot rely on the market alone to provide for our basic human right to housing.

This bill proposes to require one-for-one and like-for-like replacement of hard housing units retroactively and on a forward going basis. It is unfortunate that such specific language is necessary, but recent history has proven that it is desperately necessary. Currently, the bill requires that units be replaced going back to 2005. We contend that this is not enough and that the retroactive date be moved back to 2000. Even then, we will not be able to replace all the units lost or build all the units needed, but it will help us move closer to that goal.

Tenant Notification and Relocation

I am very pleased with the comprehensive language in the bill that spells out, in appropriate detail, the Public Housing Agency’s (PHA) responsibilities on notification and convening of tenants on the future of their housing. The bill also contains mandates for relocation assistance and assurances that residents will have

help and choices about where they move in the event of the demolition or disposition of their homes.

Location of Replacement Units and Right to Return

The bill recognizes the wisdom of allowing residents to return to their communities by requiring that an allocation of at least 1/3 of the replacement units be located on or very near the original housing site. As I stated above, these are families' homes and neighborhoods – it is where their community is and very often where their jobs, their schools and their doctors are and many families want to come back home.

To that end, we would suggest that instead of a threshold number of 1/3, the Public Housing Agency be required to survey current residents during the planning, notification and hearing process to determine what the percentage of residents is that would like to return. In some cases, that number may be below 1/3 and in many cases it may be above. In this way, residents have a greater voice in their own housing and can forge better partnerships with their PHAs to meet the true need.

Maintaining the Rights of Public Housing Residents

I am very glad to see that the rights of residents will be maintained if they move from public housing to other forms of subsidized housing. The regulations codified under section 964, for example, have been essential for ensuring that residents are able to have a real stake in the success of their housing and the health of their communities. Likewise grievance procedures and resident management give families the opportunity to access their fundamental right to due process. NPA believes that all of the rights should apply to all residents of subsidized social housing, whether they be public housing residents, project-based Section 8 residents or any other type of social housing. This is a step in the right direction for standardizing the highest level of rights and protections for all residents.

Fair Housing

For too long the process of relocation under demolition or disposition has been able to skirt the law of the land by avoiding assessing the impact of these actions under basic fair housing and civil rights laws. NPA is gratified that this bill seeks to close that loophole and require that PHAs determine the impact demolition and disposition will have on families.

NPA would recommend adding another consideration to this assessment; a Racial Justice Impact Assessment (RJIA).

For forty years, before undertaking any project, developers have been required by the National Environmental Policy Act to submit an Environmental Impact Statement to outline the impact such development will have on the environment. It's time that a similar process was put into place to take into account the impact

development and displacement decisions have on families and communities and in particular on families of color.

An RJIA would be required as part of the planning before any demolition, disposition, or construction of new housing units and also apply to plans for using Section 8 housing vouchers. The assessment would take into account the impact of any housing decisions on communities of color in the following areas:

- Distance from centers of employment
- Availability of adequate and affordable transportation, health care, and childcare
- Availability of quality schools and educational opportunities
- The concentration of minority populations in areas where residents are likely to relocate

The results of the RJIA would be made public and would guide all housing decision-making.

Finally, before I close my remarks I would like to briefly refer to HUD's plan, Transforming Rental Assistance (TRA). I realize that this is not a subject of the hearing today, but since TRA will have such a massive impact on the lives of public housing residents, I feel I need to at least mention it. I have included in my written testimony NPA's position paper that outlines the provisions that we feel must be included before any proposal to so radically transform America's social housing system should be allowed to proceed and I respectfully request that it be included in the record.

In closing, I would like to thank you again for inviting me to testify this morning and I welcome any questions you may have.