

My name is Michael Edmonds. I am a resident of public housing in Tucson, Arizona and I currently serve as the secretary of the Tucson House Resident Council where I live. I am begging on my behalf, and for those who are in similar situations as myself and my neighbors, that you provide all of the funding that is necessary towards housing in the Build Back Better Act. Housing is key to a better America.

A summary of my experiences with housing in my life is in the biography I submitted to the Committee on Financial Services. I was raised by my great-grandparents until I was nine years old, because I was the child of a teenage mother. The happiest memories of my life are during these nine years. My mother took me from them, and I joined a household which was never financially stable. My great-grandparents owned the property that my first step-father, my mother, and their daughters, lived in. Had my great-grandparents not been able to provide the residence, I suspect we would have been homeless. In that household, abusive acts were committed.

My family moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico and many times were forced to attempt to survive in shelter that was deteriorating. I specifically remember a trailer and shack on an alley a few feet away from railroad tracks. Somehow I remember my family became eligible for a housing project on Gun Club Road Southwest. My mother divorced my step-father and married my second step-father who was in the Air Force. In 1976, I was forced to move with my family to West Germany. From 1976 to 1979, because the Air Station we were assigned to had only a few hundred Americans there, I attended high schools in southern and northern West Germany. I lived in dormitories during the school years.

After returning to the United States, I became conditioned to expecting housing and shelter to be very unstable. I was unable to achieve upward economic mobility. Only able to gain part-time employment, all I could afford to rent was a converted storage shed that had a shower and toilet installed, with no cooling or heating in Arizona. After saving enough money for an old Ford Galaxy 500, I lived in it. At that time my mother had divorced my second step-father, and obtained public housing for her and one of my sisters, but there was no space for me to be with them.

After couch-surfing among bouts of homelessness for over a decade, I was offered the privilege to live in Tucson House in 2019. After moving in, I immediately began to investigate my options to get a job, return to college, begin a business, and get involved in my new community. After attending some meetings in my building, I was invited to more and other meetings throughout the community. I became actively involved in the "Thrive in the 05" initiative in my neighborhood, which is a community-driven collaboration that involves crime reduction, neighborhood improvements, and workforce and economic development, including a Choice Neighborhoods Planning and Action Grant from HUD focused on Tucson House. I was appointed Secretary of the Tucson House Resident Council, became a member of the Thrive in the 05 Steering Committee, volunteered as a Street Ambassador for the City's transportation department, and

was appointed by Tucson's Mayor and Council to their Commission on Equitable Housing and Development, of which I am now the Vice Chair.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, my role in the Tucson House Resident Council changed because the primarily older and disabled residents were in need of daily assistance and attention, including food, personal care items, and other requests that were communicated to me. My neighbors were suddenly isolated, scared, and extremely vulnerable to the disease. These requests from residents -- varied and sometimes unique -- have been ongoing. Myself and the rest of the Tucson House Resident Council began to coordinate weekly door-to-door food deliveries to residents. We helped pass out care packages of hygiene and personal care items and gave out books and puzzles to keep residents occupied in their apartments. We created a free thrift store in the building and helped new formerly homeless residents who arrived with nothing to furnish their apartments. I also provide tech support to many residents throughout the building who need help with their phones or computers so they can access services remotely and connect with loved ones. I host a monthly virtual Zoom show where residents can hear directly from City staff or other providers while we are still limiting in-person meetings. As a volunteer, I have not had access to funds with which I could apply towards serving my neighbors. I have been contacting agencies and organizations for donations. I tell them, "Anything and everything. Whatever it is you may think of, I need it for my neighbors."

After moving into Tucson House, my medical group determined that my health had deteriorated enough for them to hire an agency to file for me to receive Supplemental Security Income or disability payments. I was denied multiple times. However, I have not had time to file again for eligibility, due to the time I spend answering the call from my neighbors for assistance. When I take time for myself, my neighbors do not know of anyone they can turn to and rely upon.

The stable housing that Tucson House provides has been life-changing for many residents during the pandemic, especially those who were formerly homeless like myself. However, the physical needs of our 70-year-old building have created additional stress and uncertainty for residents during this time. For instance, with the elevators routinely breaking, older and disabled residents who cannot take the stairs can be forced to wait for long periods for an elevator, which creates conflicts and fighting among residents. I believe I have experienced the longest wait time for an elevator at 45 minutes. Tucson House lacks building-wide internet, without which many residents were suddenly cut off from contact with their neighbors, service providers, and friends and family. Entire systems like water or cooling occasionally fail and require emergency response and repairs.

Public housing like Tucson House is in dire need of attention and support. Repairs have not been completed, and the lack of maintenance has caused the cost of repairs to become more expensive than it should have been. Ignoring those needs has led, and can lead, to requiring future funding to unnecessarily compound. My building needs major renovations. Without full funding for the needs of Tucson House, over four hundred people would need to be permanently relocated to housing which can accommodate the physical limitations of current residents. This should include support services, internet access, enough large elevators to

move hundreds of people, hallways wide enough for motorized wheelchairs and scooters to be able to pass by each other, etc. However, funding to support development of such new public housing or rehabilitation of existing buildings to accommodate modern standards does not meet the need. Existing programs like Choice Neighborhoods are not enough, and also add barriers to eligibility for implementation funding that Tucson House may not ever meet

I read that H.R.5376, the bill commonly referred to as the Build Back Better Act, "provides funding for...housing, rental, and homeowner assistance programs." Housing is a primary objective of the bill. Starting with housing, from which all other objectives can follow, is the proper and logical way to successfully support the citizens of the United States of America.

President Biden's Build Back Better Plan website states: "Building back better means an updated social contract." If there ever was a social contract, it has been broken and destroyed. If it does exist, I need someone to describe what it is to me, and to our fellow citizens, so we will clearly understand what the expectations are to be. What specifically does our United States federal government owe to its citizens? Is housing only to be a possibility, as opposed to being a right or an expectation supported by Congress?

I do not believe the United States of America is unable to reasonably house all of its citizens. There has been a lack of will to provide housing. I question the desire of our federal government to do so. There has been a lack of compassion for those who are in need. People who have amenities and resources have been able to not consider those who are without, and in need.

Housing, and nutrition, are primal necessities. All of the citizens of our country will never be able to grow and thrive and prosper until we provide stable and safe shelter from which they can feel strength, and begin to feel hopeful. Housing allows for increased physical and behavioral health.

There is not enough accessible housing. Disabled individuals, and those aging, are struggling to survive in housing within which they are unable to maneuver and traverse. This population does not have enough options. I always thought they would have options; that they would be cared for by our government. To me, it seems as if they are often being discarded.

Housing needs funding for the structures, as well as the systems needed to support them. After providing shelter, some residents will need counseling and other assistance. After they are no longer homeless, many may not have mental strength and the education or skills to care for themselves. They may not know who to turn to for specific types of assistance, and how to communicate to someone that they are in need of help. There are old, bad habits which they will need to work to overcome. They will need to know that they have support available for when they are in need.

I am beginning to learn that there is a way to build environmentally friendly public housing, rather than using past construction techniques. I strongly encourage Congress to fund these types of designs.

In the building where I live, I enjoy the mixture of generations and heritages. There are children, and a newborn. I look forward to being able to watch them grow. Maybe there will be times when "Mister Edmonds" can help them with their homework, or they can complain that they need to behave because "Old Man Edmonds" can see what they are doing. Tucson House is truly a "city within a city", as well as being "a city under one roof".

Public housing is a vital resource to provide stable, affordable housing for the members of our community who have the greatest need. Tucson is experiencing a housing crisis, with the costs of rent rapidly increasing recently. We must preserve, maintain, and increase our public housing as one ongoing solution to our housing shortage. I urge you to fully fund the housing component of the Build Back Better Act so that myself and my neighbors can live in safe, high-quality housing that meets their needs.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.