

Council Bill 21-0004

Office to End Homelessness - Establishment, Administration, and Permanent Housing Voucher Program

Testimony of Carolyn Johnson, Managing Attorney
Homeless Persons Representation Project, Inc.
Economic and Community Development Committee, February 23, 2021

Homeless Persons Representation Project, Inc. (HPRP) is a non-profit civil legal aid organization that provides free legal representation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and advocates for public policy that will end homelessness.

HPRP SUPPORTS CB 21-0004

I. The Permanent Housing Voucher Program provides much needed affordable housing to Baltimore's lowest-income residents.

The affordable housing crisis in this country has been longstanding and continues to reach new heights as millions of renters struggle to maintain their housing during the pandemic. In Maryland, for every 100 households with the lowest incomes there are only 34 affordable rental units, less than the national average.¹ Baltimore City has a shortage of 28,684 affordable rental units for the lowest income families.² This shortage results in large numbers of renters living in housing they cannot afford. In Baltimore, high housing cost burdens and housing instability are widespread with 57% of all renters paying more than 30% of their income on housing costs, and 33% of renters paying more than 50% of their income on housing.³

The lack of affordable housing and its consequences, including homelessness, disproportionately impact Black households. The recently released 2020 Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice in the Baltimore Region (AI) found that one of the primary Fair Housing issues was the significant shortage of deeply affordable rental units which, “results in cost burden, overcrowding/doubling up, an increase risk of eviction, a higher risk of homelessness, and a lack of economic opportunity.”⁴ All of these negative consequences are experienced disproportionately by Black households, this includes the most severe consequence of homelessness.⁵ While the population of Baltimore City is 61% Black, 74% of homeless individuals are Black and 83% of homeless families with children are Black.⁶ These racial disparities are the result of decades of direct and systemic racism in federal, state and local housing policy. New housing policy must acknowledge this past and aim to provide remedies that provide opportunities to Black families that were historically excluded.

¹ National Low Income Housing Coalition, *The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Rental Homes*, available at <https://reports.nlihc.org/gap/2018/md>.

² 2020 Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice in the Baltimore Region (AI), Sec. V., p. 11, available at https://www.baltometro.org/sites/default/files/bmc_documents/general/community/analysis-to-impediments/2020_RegionalAI_final.pdf.

³ The Abell Report, *The Double Crisis: A statistical Report on Rental Housing Costs and Affordability in Baltimore City, 2000-2013*, p. 7., available at <https://abell.org/sites/default/files/files/cd-doublecrisis516.pdf>.

⁴ AI, p. 5.

⁵ AI, Sec. V., pp. 6-9.

⁶ Id.



In 2019 the Baltimore City Continuum of Care created its Action Plan on Homelessness recognizing that, “safe, affordable housing is the solution to homelessness.”⁷ The Action Plan specifically recommends creating a local housing voucher program (LHVP) finding that, “as the federal government continues to decrease or freeze funding for subsidized housing, LHVPs are becoming an increasingly vital tool with a proven track record in other communities.”⁸ Cities like Baltimore can no longer wait for State or Federal resources to appear, they must take action to serve their own communities. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports over 300 State and local voucher programs currently operate in the US.⁹

The Permanent Housing Voucher Program will provide a much needed choice for families currently residing in Permanent Support Housing (PSH) who no longer need intensive supportive services, but still need financial housing assistance. PSH families may transition to a Permanent Housing Voucher and maintain their affordable housing. In turn, PSH resources are freed up to serve those who are currently experiencing chronic homelessness and need the housing and intensive services package. The Permanent Housing Voucher program creates more options for families, creates flow in Baltimore’s homeless response system, and recognizes that housing is the primary solution to homelessness.

II. The Office to End Homelessness promotes good government by increasing transparency and accountability.

The creation of a permanent Office to End Homelessness reaffirms and codifies Baltimore City’s commitment to making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. The Office will be led by a Director that is nominated by the Mayor and confirmed by the City Council, similar to other City agency heads. The Office is charged with a clear mission, duties and responsibilities, including following evidence-based models, decriminalizing homelessness, promoting racial equity and consulting with individuals with lived experience of homelessness. The Office must also report annually to the City Council on its efforts and make legislative or policy recommendations. This structure will enhance the relationship between the Office and the City Council and recognizes that ending homelessness requires the commitment of the entire City government and not just the Mayor or a single agency or system. Ending homelessness is possible and the Office to End Homelessness will bring strong leadership, transparency and accountability to its critical mission.

We strongly urge the Committee to issue a favorable report.

⁷ Baltimore City Continuum of Care Action Plan on Homelessness, p.2., available at <https://journeyhome.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/FINAL-Action-Plan-Approved-June-2019.pdf>.

⁸ Id at 6.

⁹ National Low Income Housing Coalition, State and City Funded Rental Housing Programs, available at <https://nlihc.org/state-and-city-funded-rental-housing-programs>

