



February 28, 2021

Testimony in Opposition of HB 2100

Dear Chair Fahey and members of the House Committee on Housing,

My name is Kemp Shuey and I am the Executive Director for Community Action serving Washington County. I am writing in opposition to HB 2100. In its current amended form, this bill will result in a 20% reduction in Emergency Housing Assistance (EHA) and State Homeless Assistance Program (SHAP) funding through Community Action agencies.

Community Action leads the way to eliminate issues of poverty and create opportunities for people and communities to thrive. In the past year, as COVID has ripped through our community we have been on the frontline delivering crucial resources keeping people housed, warm, and safe. With CARES funding entrusted to us by both the state and Washington County we have:

- Prevented eviction for nearly 8,000 people by distributing \$13 million in rent assistance.
- Kept 5,000 households safe and warm by distributing \$6.2 million in utility assistance and leveraged our existing utility assistance program to expand to water and garbage assistance.
- Targeted resources to culturally and linguistically isolated communities through a broad network of nine culturally specific partner agencies and used flexible funds to help increase the capacity of those organizations to support outreach and distribution efforts.

At the beginning of the pandemic, we led the effort to coordinate the extension of our county's severe weather shelter network. Working alongside nonprofit and public partners we provided safe, congregate shelter for 291 individuals through the end of May 2020.

We have significant concerns regarding the proposed amendments in HB 2100. A 20% reduction in funding through Community Action represents a direct cut in funding for the entire homeless services system in Washington County. Both EHA and SHAP fund critical components of our homeless services system including Street Outreach, Emergency Shelter, Coordinated Entry, Housing Navigation, Rapid Rehousing Assistance, and Support Services. Community Action distributes 40% of the Washington County EHA & SHAP allocations to community-based providers including Home Plate Youth Services, Boys & Girls Aid, Domestic Violence Resource Center, New Narrative, Family Promise, and Just Compassion.

An effective homeless service system requires a tremendous amount of coordination and collaboration among a diverse set of providers with deep local knowledge of the community. As a collaborative, Washington County has excelled at building a system that is responsive to the needs of people experiencing homelessness and has demonstrated capacity to scale up operations when investments in preventing and addressing homelessness are increased.

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The proposed amendments by OHCS create a competitive process which we believe will be detrimental to our collaborative efforts. Our ability to plan long term, follow the data, and consider all available sources of funding when targeting investments will be significantly hampered by this proposed change in statute. Additionally, proposed amendments shift resources and responsibility of a highly localized system to a state agency that has yet to define how these changes advance statewide housing goals, support locally driven strategies, or ensure accountability.

While our system has many strengths, we agree that there are plenty of areas for improvement. We share the broad goals that seem to be driving these proposed amendments, in particular the necessity of centering equity and racial justice in the system. At Community Action, we see that communities of color are disproportionately experiencing homelessness along with other issues of poverty. We welcome the opportunity to redesign a system that centers community voices, understands the interconnectedness of the homeless services system to others, and eliminates racial disparities in our community. As currently written, the proposed amendments in HB 2100 do not achieve this.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our perspective on HB 2100. We ask you not to move this bill out of committee, and rather encourage OHCS to work with Community Action agencies, other service providers, culturally specific organizations, and people with lived experience to identify changes that will improve the system to achieve our shared goals.

Regards,

Kemp Shuey
Executive Director
Community Action

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