

Testimony of Tisha Guthrie, Bolton House Residents Association (BHRA)
HB 105-Department of Housing and Community Development
Community Development Authority
Compliance Monitor Reporting
Environment and Transportation Committee, Jan. 28, 2021
Sponsor: Del. Shaneka Henson
Position: FAVORABLE

My name is Tisha Guthrie and I have lived, learned and worked in Maryland most of my life. Due to various medical conditions which have affected my health status, I qualified for and was granted a Housing Choice Voucher and have been a participant since 2010. My experiences with various landlords, property managers and local housing agencies led me to my involvement in both local and statewide housing justice initiatives. Currently, I am an active member of Renters United Maryland (RUM), Baltimore Renters United (BRU) and Bolton House Residents Association (BHRA).

Since 2013, I have resided at Bolton House Apartments under Edgewood Property management. During this time, I have witnessed and personally experienced the emotional, mental and physical health consequences of poorly managed and maintained housing. For the purpose of brevity I will not list the bevy of infractions by this company. What is evident is that this company's malfeasance has no consequences and, for those who are directly affected, there is no reliable recourse. Even after residents report complaints to the appropriate personnel, namely the local housing authority and HUD, the very management company receiving federal dollars prove non-compliant. The housing conditions which impose such serious health threats and long-term consequences also undermine the country's investment in affordable, healthy and safe housing.

Establishing and implementing legislation such as HB105 would disrupt the well documented misuse of funds and mandate much needed oversight for agencies carrying the responsibility to provide safe and decent housing, one of the main determinants of health outcomes. Requiring accountability and transparency is simply an admission that tax payers deserve the right to access information to evaluate the performance of those contracting to receive federal dollars. HB 105 also acknowledges the value of inclusion by seeking the participation of tenants, those with the most insight and most immediately impacted.

As an active participant in the HCV program, my experience verifies that there is a need to take a serious look at how clients are allowed to engage in the process of self advocacy and whether the current conditions foster an environment to dissuade participation at the community level. With a digital infrastructure which seems designed to breed frustration, hearing from those most vulnerable who benefit from low-income housing is nearly impossible. Considering the unlikelihood of actually connecting with a staff member via phone and the lack of regular accessibility to a electronic customer service portal to simply file service requests/complaints, this is yet another example of the disenfranchisement of the poor and underrepresented. This is also a demonstration of how racial inequities take various shapes and are deeply woven into our systems.

As noted by the House Hearing of 113 Congress and documented by the U.S. Government Publishing Office, the lack of oversight and transparency is resulting in the serious compromise and demise of housing authorities nationwide, some facing the threat of receivership. From poor property management and dilapidation of structures to unethical practices of HA executives, the absence of accountability measures is expensive and counterproductive. According to the testimony of the Inspector General of

HUD (2011), \$225 million of questionable spending further verifies the need for accountability measures. This same study found the backlog in capital needs in public housing stood at \$2.7 billion; 478 developments were failing.

HB 105 stands to address the current instability of our housing authorities, without which most of our vulnerable populations would be left without a housing safety net. This current pandemic has demonstrated the intersectional relationship between health outcomes and access to healthy, clean and safe housing. I encourage a favorable report on HB 105 and thank you in advance for helping to ensure the sustainability of affordable housing.

Respectfully,
Tisha Guthrie, MSW, LMSW
Treasurer
Bolton House Residents Association (BHRA)
zigtgut@gmail.com