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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1073 AS AMENDED**  
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House of Ruth is a non-profit organization providing shelter, counseling, and legal services to victims of domestic violence throughout the State of Maryland. House of Ruth has offices in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Prince George’s County, and Montgomery County. House Bill 1073 would require the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to establish special eligibility requirements under the Maryland Homeowner Assistance Fund for victims of domestic violence **We urge the Environment and Transportation Committee to report favorably on House Bill 1073 as amended.**

The Homeowner Assistance Fund was established by the American Rescue Plan Act enacted on March 11, 2021, to help homeowners experiencing financial hardship after January 21, 2020. The Maryland DHCD will receive \$248 million through this program over three years to assist homeowners struggling with their mortgage payments or other housing costs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the program is to create a long-term sustainable and affordable mortgage as opposed to short-term assistance.

According to the Homeowner Assistance Fund’s website, the Fund is

designed to offer a one-time payment of a delinquent mortgage amount and/or additional funds to facilitate a principal curtailment or rate reduction to right size ongoing mortgage payments to levels affordable to the homeowner. Designed to avoid imminent displacement (within 90-days) due to, but not limited to property tax delinquency, chattel loan or land lease delinquency; homeowners association fee / condominium association fee delinquency; mortgage delinquency.

Most mortgage servicers will work with their borrowers who are exiting forbearance or are in default. Servicers will generally utilize standardized loss mitigation strategies to lower monthly borrower obligations by 20%. The Homeowner Assistance Fund Mortgage Loan expands the servicers’ ability to help the homeowner avoid foreclosure or displacement for the long-term. This assistance will create mortgage payments that are sustainable to the homeowner’s “new normal.”

Many survivors of domestic violence faced financial hardship during the pandemic. However, to apply for the Homeowner Assistance Fund, an applicant must provide: income, mortgage, and property taxes, a hardship attestation, and a bankruptcy consent form, if appropriate. Unfortunately, many survivors of domestic violence do not have access to these documents due to the financial abuse and control of their partners. Many abusers refuse to put their victims' names on the title to property and financial accounts, lock them out of access to accounts, prevent them from accessing documents and account statements, and conceal information about the household finances. A survivor whose abuser has engaged in any of these behaviors will not have access to the documents necessary to apply to the Fund. This is often true even in cases where the abuser has moved out of the home, leaving the victim to potentially become homeless.

HB 1073 will address this by allowing a certified victim of domestic violence to seek financial assistance from the Fund and submit some or all of the information and documents known to them and within their possession. HB 1073 will allow victims of domestic violence who own their homes but who have faced financial hardship as a result of the pandemic to apply for the Fund and avoid mortgage delinquency, default, foreclosure, or displacement, even if their abusers will not cooperate.

House of Ruth supports the bill as amended. The first amendment would change the definition process for certifying a domestic violence victim to be similar to the certification process in Maryland's Address Confidentiality Program. The second amendment would change the definition of abuse to match the definition in Family Law Article § 4-501, the protective order statute.

**The House of Ruth urges the Environment and Transportation Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 1073 as amended.**