



Urban League of Philadelphia

Pennsylvania Senate Democrats
Senate Democratic Policy Hearing

Written Testimony by:

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Good Afternoon Members of the Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Caucus, and fellow esteemed panelists. It's an honor to be with you all today and share with you my background and testimony on the issue of housing here in the commonwealth. My name is Andrea Custis, and I am the President & CEO of the Urban League of Philadelphia. We are an affiliate of the National Urban League, one of the oldest and largest community-based movements dedicated to empowering underserved urban communities.

I want to first commend the efforts of the Pennsylvania legislature, including the Pennsylvania Senate Democrats for addressing the housing affordability crisis through legislation this past year. Senate Democrats have introduced bold legislation aimed at tackling the housing crisis in the Commonwealth and protecting homeowners and renters alike. I am grateful for their leadership on this issue. However, we know that so much needs to be done to overhaul decades of disinvestment in housing opportunities for Black communities. Not just here in the city of Philadelphia, but across Pennsylvania and the United State we have seen historic inequality between Black Americans in the housing sector because of discriminatory housing practices that still linger on into this day. I believe that it is past time that we reinvest in these communities and to begin building generational wealth in Black families.

Housing:

The history of housing in America was significantly impacted by structural racism. For many individuals, owning a home symbolizes the "American dream." Yet -- no racial group sees a greater disparity in owning versus renting than Black Philadelphians. 2018 Census data shows a gap of more than 7 percent, with only 37.7 percent owning a home as opposed to 44.9 percent renting. For context, 48.2 percent of white residents own their homes, compared to only 38.9 who rent. There are nearly 34,000 fewer Black homeowners in Philadelphia than white homeowners. These facts mean that Black families hold less wealth overall. A recent study from the [Urban Institute](#) found that "if homeownership were racially equalized, the racial wealth gap would diminish." Not only do we need to reinvest to level the playing field so that Black families can own homes, it's about building and maintaining generational wealth for decades to come, and that starts with fair and equitable



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housing practices. Our government has the number one role to play in ensuring that the wrongs of the past are fixed and rewritten. Black families must have equal access to affordable, high quality loans and financial coaching. When we allow for that to happen, we will see opportunities for Black Americans drastically improve when it comes education and health factors will improve.

COVID-19 and Housing:

It's no secret that COVID-19 has exacerbated the housing crisis. Data from [Brookings](#) indicates that the “impact of COVID-19 on homeowners not only still exists, but it has significantly worsened, especially among Black and Hispanic households and young adults.” That study concluded that the “eviction/foreclosure rate of Black and Hispanic respondents increased by 7 percent as compared to only 2 percent among white respondents.” COVID-19 has also affected renters, “about a [quarter](#) of Black and Latino renters who responded to the survey did not pay or deferred rent in May, compared with 14 percent of white renters.”

With this in mind, solutions to the housing crisis must be race conscious or else we risk financial turmoil for Black families across the city and commonwealth. While I applauded previous moratoriums on evictions and foreclosures, the commonwealth will need robust assistance programs that protect tenants in the long term to prevent a tidal wave of people losing housing, which leads to negative health outcomes. We must make racial equity an explicit starting goal of PA's housing policy response. This includes:

- Eviction protection and housing counseling programs
- track and measure outcomes of PA's rental assistance program to gauge whether it is helping to reduce racial disparities;
- Provide individualized financial counseling similar to the [National Foreclosure Mitigation Counseling Program](#);
- Ensure that any housing recovery programs include the voices of those most impacted by housing policies;
- Focus on stabilizing owners of smaller rental properties by providing them mortgage forbearance and working with lenders on credit;

These are just a few of the many policies we need to ensure we have an equitable recovery. I want to thank you all for this important and urgent discussion regarding housing in the Commonwealth. I look forward to robust, equitable legislation being implemented in the future from the Pennsylvania legislature.