

Lancaster, PA Hearing - September 13, 2024 - Senate Democratic Policy Committee.

Hello, my name is Sterling Johnson.

I am a housing organizer with Philadelphia Housing Action and on the Board of the Philadelphia Community Land Trust or PCLT. PCLT comes out of the 2020 Benjamin Parkway Encampment fight which led to the redirecting vacant viable public housing from the private market into a land trust to serve no and low-income Philadelphia residents. We have been able to work with the Philadelphia Housing Authority around transferring these houses and supporting the people within them for the last 4 years. Currently, we own 14 occupied houses and two vacant houses and all are scheduled to be rehabbed and renovated. We will transfer more over a time with the Housing Authority as well.

I will start with some overall frameworks and then move to the focus which should be on Housing. Homelessness is a Disability Justice issue and that means we have to interrupt business as usual to meet the needs of people living on the street. The only answer to homelessness and criminalization is the focus on providing permanent housing solutions. We must focus on the entities that will provide that support, including the public housing authorities, housing subsidy recipients, affordable housing providers that actually want to serve people and understanding housing within the framework of a community. Housing includes access to transportation, nutrition, education for children and teens and employment for adults.

Please stick with facts about what is happening rather being affected by sensational stories: <https://www.haplegal.org/survey-2023/>. People are not choosing homelessness and there are many legitimate reasons that people are not in shelters. There are many reasons people languish in shelters for years with finding permanent housing. But people experiencing homelessness want housing. That is the start of this conversation.

- 1st option - People prefer housing subsidies that allow them to use it on the market to give them a sense of their own agency.
- 2nd option - Others prefer permanent supportive housing with more connections with others in similarly situated circumstances.

The First Priority: Stop Criminalization & Restrict Data sharing/Access to HMIS health data. Any criminalization, warrants, fines, missed court dates, incarceration interferes with a person's ability to get into any healthcare treatment setting or any housing space. With that record, it becomes a "scarlet letter," a branding that a person is dangerous and therefore needs a carceral response, including controlling a person's communications and movement, a curfew, family visitation, and the surveillance of the urine and blood. Any attempt to get treatment is a further reason to restrict access to medications (like opioids, stimulants and other controlled substances).

We must take more account of the design and user experience of being engaged in social services. I do not trust the quantitative data about homelessness. I have personally watched PIT count volunteers refuse to count people living in the woods or in difficult to reach spaces. We cannot count our way out of this by looking at the numbers, the amount of treatment or shelter beds. We cannot trust the annual point in time count when people are making space in the woods. We should start by listening to people's experiences of being homeless, being incarcerated, receiving healthcare and social services. And we have to understand the experiences of people that are precariously housed to see the path to getting to the street. There is a carceral and dehumanizing logic to each aspect of the service system. It is made for a person to feel as if their time is less meaningful and important. You are reminded of this over and over again.

No Wrong Door, but Stop pushing out/"Streeting" & Fully Fund Medical Respite and Peer Respite . There should be no wrong door for a person to enter into treatment and health insurers should be penalized for not treating patients the first time. Discharging people to the street should be fined. If people leave it is due to them not getting access to the correct medication. We have discussed discharges with the Penn Administrators and they have leaving against medical advice (AMA) rates of 25-30%. So, 1/4 of the patients leave against medical advice? What does that say about the medical advice? We need many more spaces with medically skilled individuals to handle complex needs while people are also adjusting to new medication regimens and new ways to handle wounds or amputations. We need to fast track opening more of these spaces across the state.

Hospital investments in housing rehabs and construction must increase immediately!

Senators must attend the PHFA meetings to understand more about what they are funding! They have a current funding program which is in the right direction but must be scaled 20 fold. In 2024, they matched funding for the following:

- The 17th Street Community Corridor (Philadelphia) - \$300,000 match (\$200,000 from AmeriHealth Carnitas and \$100,000 from Temple Health Systems);
- Meadowbrook (Bucks County) - \$824,950 match (\$575,000 of Woods Services' funds and \$499,900 in donated land);
- North Park Avenue (Philadelphia) - \$600,000 match (Jefferson Health, Penn Medicine, and Temple Health); and
- St. Katherine Drexel Place (Philadelphia) - \$100,000 match (Trinity Health)

We must pressure the largest health systems to have real investments over years into Housing and more than just into financing mechanisms. \$1 million for housing in Philadelphia means nothing. We

need a decade of investment and across all counties with hospital systems. It takes coordination to build it and then to manage it to ensure that people are given the proper support.

Encourage Qualified Affordable Housing Providers to model community inclusive cultures

When we have been organizing buildings and developments with mostly senior and disabled residents, there is a high amount of need. There is a need for reasonable and attentive staff. We have to have qualified developers that meet certain thresholds for responsiveness and engagement of their communities and take claims of harassment, not just discrimination as valid. Discrimination work does not do anything.

Right now, HUD provides some guidance for Public Housing Authorities, but we know that that is not enough! Let's develop our own and build developers that want to be engaged in this space. Let's start with places like [HDC MidAtlantic \(Lancaster\)](#), [POAH \(from Chicago\)](#), [Inglis Housing Corporation \(Philadelphia\)](#), and others that we don't see them selling off their properties and displacing people to stay afloat as organizations.

We believe that: 1) Self-advocacy and self determination are keys to any solutions. We have to interrupt patterns of saviorism, and funding cycles that change every other year to have a comprehensive plan for housing.

Medium-Long term Housing Solutions.

1) Start training and technical assistance for small and medium-sized community land trusts. We need organizations with restrictive covenants on their land beyond 15 or 30 years. We need to support land trusts and other community based organizations that intend to commit to low income housing for 99 years. That commitment must be in writing. Support those organizations with committed technical assistance and contract legal help to traverse the various legal and economic hurdles that go along with holding property in trust for decades.

Issues that we have come across: How does one hold insurance in low-income and disinvested neighborhoods? How does one pay for different types of work from non-unionized workers? How do we find time to train adult learners in sustainability and health fields (lead and mold remediation for example) when they have families and other responsibilities?

Generally, once organizations become too big, they no longer represent the community. We have seen this pattern and there is no funding available for smaller organizations to take the step of taking on the management of their own property.

2) Break up housing monopolies & 3) Refuse tax credits for housing developers that sell off low-income housing. With several multi-state organizations in luxury development, affordable housing development, and property management it has become impossible to hold these organizations accountable for their actions. When assisting tenant organizing in two campaigns against the Altman family of companies and the Ingerman Group we have found it increasingly impossible for the state to enforce its own restrictive covenants.

There has been a recent pattern of companies displacing low income tenants and then getting access to tax credits soon after.

In 2018, after selling the [Arvilla](#), Mission First, the non-profit housing landlord was able to get tax credits to build at New Market West. The Arvilla was sold for a mere two million dollars. At the time, Mission First was funded by the city's Department of Behavioral Health to administer more than 1,000 other disabled people's housing. At that size, they need to be a City or State agency with actual accountability to the people, not just to investors or a Board.

In 2022, after ending the HUD contract for the [University City Townhomes](#), the owner, Brett Altman was able to gain tax credits to build senior units at a site about 10 blocks north.

In 2024, this occurred as [Ingerman management violated a restrictive covenant](#) and then built \$1 million condos on the site. They then received more tax credits to build and maintain housing in Bucks County.

4) Stop selling off public lands to private developers & 5) Use public lands for low-income and disabled persons housing. Where there is public land available, transfer the land to community land trusts and community-based organizations that want to manage it and then support them.

Before she passed, Jen Bennetch led an organizing campaign called #OccupyPHA. Part of the housing campaign started by Jen Bennetch was to stop the mass sale of the public lands to the private sphere. She succeeded in forcing them to undertake a [study about their practices of gentrifying Philadelphia's historically black neighborhoods](#). She fought to stop the practice of the cities selling off their public goods to the private sphere.

At this time, we must take back some of that land for the Housing Authorities. They should be treated as a place to facilitate the transfer of the land back to smaller community based organizations that have long term accountability to the local concerns. There must be accountability for these land banks. They cannot just be political favors to hand out to politicians' friends.

6) Fair Share Commitment by Pennsylvania's 67 counties. We must understand that it is every counties' responsibility to provide for low income housing, recovery housing, short-term shelter space for returning citizens, families, Domestic Violence survivors, and treatment for people with substance use disorders. This housing is actually protected under the Fair Housing Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act and enforcement of these laws could be a strategy for settlement and siting of these housing providers.

Recent experiences in [Norristown](#), Pottstown and [Havertown](#) in Delaware County, and the [Fairmount neighborhood](#) in Philadelphia show me that we have to do more work as a state to understand these spaces as therapeutic and not nuisances. So far the NIMBYs have forced this housing to be in poorer neighborhoods or as a part of the prison complex.

I believe that there is a lot of work that needs to be done and I'm glad you all are here for it.

Thank you for your time,
Sterling Johnson, J.D., Ph.D.(c)