

Re: Testimony regarding HB 2001

Chair Fahey and Members of the Committee.

My name is Michael Fieldman and I am the recently retired Executive Director (20 years) of the United Community Action Network (UCAN) that serves Douglas and Josephine Counties, and also a past member (8 years) of the Housing Stability Council. I am writing regarding HB 2001 and in response to some of the testimony given on this bill, at the Hearing on 3/4/2021, with the intent of presenting the Committee with a more nuanced picture of past events, dealing with previous reviews of this legislation, than was presented last week, as well as to offer perspectives on the value of maintaining the current structure that needs emphasis.

During the hearing several presenters stated that the current legislation has not been looked at in over 30 years and therefore was in need of review. In actuality this legislation was looked at extensively in 2015 as part of an effort, led by the previous OHCS Director Margaret Van Vliet. I was a part of that effort both as a representative of the Community Action network and as a Housing Council member. As part of that review all aspects of the current legislation was looked at and debated. One of the topics of greatest consternation to Ms. Van Vliet was all of the outside entities that OHCS was required to check in with and coordinate with. She developed a visual display that she termed her "spaghetti chart" to show all the organizations she was required to consult with and how complicated it was for OHCS to make decisions. She wanted to eliminate **all** of the requirements to consult with outside organizations, including the long-standing requirement to work with the Community Action network. Instead she looked to expand the Housing Council duties to take on the consultative responsibility for the Community Services side of OHCS in addition to their existing Housing consultative duties. This was a role the Council had not played in the past. Thus was created the Housing Stability Council.

During this process the Community Action network expressed strong concerns about the loss of local input to OHCS and lobbied hard to maintain that direct and required local input. In the final outcome, Community Action ended up being the sole local community voice representing all of Oregon communities, with OHCS successfully eliminating all other required direct outside voices. That is why Community Action is listed in legislation as the only entity to officially consult with OHCS. It was not due to any desire on its part to exclude other organizations or to be the sole voice, but was in response to OHCS's efforts to exclude all organizations. This was an effort that would have been successful if not for the very concerted effort by the Community Action network to maintain its historic legislatively required consultative role. Without this voice there would not have been any required input from anyone outside of the formal OHCS system, of which I include the Housing Stability Council. I do find it interesting that OHCS is now concerned about the very thing it created.

I think this about face in OHCS's direction is an excellent example of why it is critical to maintain a strong consultative role for Community Action so there is a consistent voice over time for the clients and the communities they serve. Over the years, I worked with numerous OHCS directors and each director pulls the agency and the services it provides in a different direction based upon their own ideas or more often based upon the political winds of the time. These winds have swung between the extremes of wanting to expand services and OHCS's capabilities to wanting to dismantle the agency and

its services. Unfortunately, the winds that are experienced at the State level often translate into large catastrophic storms at the local level for the people seeking services as well as for the agencies trying to get those services to the people. The reality of this is evident even in this current direction of OHCS in that it has yet to get out any of the over \$40 million dollars it has set aside for new service groups. This has meant that in the middle of a housing/pandemic the people who so desperately need the help those dollars can provide have, both literally and figuratively, been left sitting in the cold. A true catastrophic storm crisis at the human level caused by the bureaucratic winds created at the OHCS level. Having a strong community based advocacy voice, in the form of the Community Action network, into OHCS, is critical in both mitigating and tempering these storms that occur at the client and community level created by changes at the OHCS level. Community Action is also often the buffer for the decisions made by OHCS. This buffering lessens the negative impacts these decisions have on the actual recipients of the services.

This dynamic tension between the local communities, through the Community Action network, and the State is a healthy aspect and not a weakness of Oregon's service delivery system for the housing challenged and I would suggest is part of the reason Oregon has a better system than many states, as decisions are more thoroughly vetted prior to implementation in response to push back from the Community Action network. As was stated in the hearing there is distrust and discomfort by some in dealing with a State agency. The Community Action network provides a client focused, locally based and locally controlled voice into that system that is willing and able to confront the State when appropriate. This is a good thing and not a bad thing.

This illustrates the fact that Community Action plays both a legislatively established client advocacy role with OHCS as well as being a contractor with OHCS. This unique relationship needs to be clearly understood in the current discussions as it is critical that these two roles not be confused and intertwined in the thinking of how to proceed with any changes and that it be understood that impacting one side of this relationship equation impacts the other side as well. A clear way to lessen the advocacy strength of the Community Action network is to weaken its contractual side, something some OHCS directors in the past would have been very happy with. It is critical, for the sake of stable and consistent and meaningful services to the people in our communities, that both aspects of the relationship be maintained in a strong position. Any efforts to reconfigure the power dynamic of this relationship needs to strengthen and not weaken this dynamic tension. In the long run a strong Community Action advocacy role, driven by a strong contractual relationship is in the best interest of the people receiving the services, our local communities, OHCS, and the State of Oregon.

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