

**Joint Committee on Housing - Hearing on H.4138, The Affordable Homes Act
Testimony from Members of the Western Massachusetts Housing Coalition**

Keith Fairey, Way Finders

Gina Govoni, Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority

Eileen Peltier, Berkshire Housing

Brad Gordon, Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority

KEITH FAIREY, WAY FINDERS:

Chair Edwards, Vice Chair Keenan, Chair Arciero, Vice Chair Kilcoyne, Honorable Members of the Committee - thank you for this opportunity.

I am Keith Fairey, President & CEO of Way Finders, which works to strengthen housing stability and economic mobility, and to build thriving neighborhoods in communities throughout Western Massachusetts. Way Finders is a member of the Western Massachusetts Housing Coalition, a collaboration of over 50 organizations - including municipalities, nonprofits, advocates and more - working to advance State policies that meet the unique housing needs of western Mass.

I'm joined by three leaders, Gina Govoni, Eileen Peltier and Brad Gordon. We're here on behalf of the Coalition to share a western Mass perspective on the bill. The Coalition has detailed recommendations on the Affordable Homes Act, which we attached to our written testimony. Today, we will highlight key points.

We strongly support the overall bill, with the transformative investment of \$4.1 billion in housing production programs and complementary policy changes. This bill provides resources and tools to address the unprecedented housing challenges currently facing the Commonwealth, and we urge you and your colleagues to move it forward without delay.

The current crisis demands a bold solution, which this historic bill provides by funding housing production. Building more homes is the solution, and western Mass developers can be key partners in this. Currently, our Western Mass Housing Coalition members have a robust pipeline of 49 projects in 19 localities, creating 1,500 units by 2028. However, our region alone needs at least 19,000 units by 2025. All of these projects require state resources to move forward, and we'll need even more funding to truly build the homes that we need.

We urge you to protect the bill's authorization amounts, especially in the most flexible and accessible programs - such as the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, Housing Stabilization and Investment Fund, and Housing Innovation Fund, all of which directly fund construction.

We also recommend changes to ensure these programs fully work for western Mass communities. This includes removing the 10-unit minimum from Commonwealth Builder and the Homeownership Tax Credit, which can be hard for projects in our region to meet, and allowing more subsidy for projects in softer markets like western Massachusetts.

I'll now invite Gina Govoni to speak.

GINA GOVONI, FRANKLIN COUNTY REGIONAL HOUSING & REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY:

Chair Edwards, Chair Arciero, Members of the Committee - thank you for your time today. I am Gina Govoni, Executive Director of the Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority.

I urge you to protect the \$1.6 billion investment in public housing, along with legislative changes that would allow housing authorities to use capital most efficiently, by adding a preference for mixed-finance developments involving public housing units, removing the home rule petition requirement for authorities to merge, and including new development and redevelopment in procurement exemptions.

Public housing is a critical source of affordable units and we need to reinvest now, to avoid losing housing and setting us further back in this crisis. At the same time, we need more flexibility to better stretch the dollars we do have, which these legislative changes will enable.

We also need changes to meet the needs of our rural communities - which are 83% of cities and towns in western Mass. The State Qualified Allocation Plan and scoring criteria should be amended so rural projects can effectively compete for funding, and capital program requirements need to be adjusted so rural projects are eligible- particularly those rural communities that are economically distressed. Finally, building housing in rural communities is often infeasible without first investing in infrastructure, so creating a rural set-aside in programs funding infrastructure, such as HousingWorks, is also key.

Thank you. I will now invite Eileen Peltier.

EILEEN PELTIER, BERKSHIRE HOUSING:

Chair Edwards, Chair Arciero, Members of the Committee - thank you for this opportunity. I am Eileen Peltier, President & CEO of Berkshire Housing, the regional provider of housing solutions including housing development, service oriented management, rental housing vouchers, emergency financial assistance and more.

I want to highlight the importance of the seasonal communities designation, which recognizes the unique dynamics of places like the Berkshires where we have significant seasonal variation in residents. Establishing a Seasonal Communities Coordinating Council with representation from across the State is a strong first step to developing meaningful policies that meet our needs.

I also urge you to protect the bill's investment in rehab. Western Mass has more older homes than other parts of the State - approximately 65% of houses here were built before 1970. Older homes require money for maintenance, to ensure they stay habitable. Programs and policies that support preservation and rehab - such as the Neighborhood Stabilization Program and amending the receivership statute - are critical to keeping our housing stock safe, healthy and affordable.

Finally, I'll invite Brad Gordon.

BRAD GORDON, BERKSHIRE COUNTY REGIONAL HOUSING AUTHORITY:

Chairs Edwards and Arciero, Members of the Committee - thank you. I am Brad Gordon, Executive Director of the Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority.

BCRHA, a nontraditional housing authority, implements a continuum of interrelated services and programming to promote housing stability and prevent and resolve homelessness. Programming includes housing and legal counseling services; dispute resolution programs, and intensive case management assistance through the Tenancy Preservation Program.

Today, I want to highlight the bill's requirement for EOHLC to develop a statewide housing plan, which we strongly support. This is an important step for ensuring that the Commonwealth has a clear and comprehensive strategy for addressing this housing crisis both in the short and long-term. We recommend strengthening this language by requiring EOHLC to set production goals by region, providing benchmarks to measure each investment's impact and efficacy. The plan should also directly link capital and programmatic resources, between the bond bill and annual budget, and set joint goals for housing stability and housing production.

I also urge you to ensure western Massachusetts representation, including rural representation, on all of the Committees created in this bill. Full participation and input from every part of the state is crucial, as these Committees set the strategy for this historic investment.

In summary, we fully support this historic bill. Our recommendations ensure this bill works in all communities, including western Mass. We urge you to incorporate our recommendations, and to work to move this bill forward without delay.

Finally, I want to close by thanking you on behalf of the Western Mass Housing Coalition, and to recognize our key advocacy partners, Pamela Schwartz and the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness, and Emily Haber of MACDC. The Coalition is aligned with and supports their advocacy priorities as well.

Thank you.