



December 5, 2022

Via Email and United States Mail

Phil Mendelson, Chair
District of Columbia Council
John E. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

Re: Reform of the District of Columbia Housing Authority

Dear Chairperson Mendelson:

The Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs opposes the Mayor's proposed legislation to restructure the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia Housing Authority. The plan will further subject the Housing Authority to political interference, diminish the role of residents, and is inadequate to address the failure of accountability that has led to the most recent crisis. The Council must act to fix the problems at the Housing Authority, but when it does, it should be based on significant input from residents and consistent with evidence-based best practices.

The District of Columbia is facing an affordable housing crisis that is harming far too many families and individuals of color. Public housing is a key element to creating safe, accessible, and stable housing for all District of Columbia residents, but for years, these units have been allowed to fall into disrepair and many are left vacant. That the Housing Authority has been permitted to deteriorate to the state described in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development audit is inexcusable. The neglect and mismanagement of the Housing Authority has forced residents to live in unsafe conditions, and the high and unnecessary vacancy rate has left others homeless.

The Mayor's proposed legislation to shrink the Board of Commissioners and to provide consultant services is misguided and not serious. The problems run deep and require long-term structural solutions that hold the agency meaningfully accountable to the people who live on Housing Authority properties and to the public. Political control over the Housing Authority has been part of the problem, and the Mayor's bill only makes that worse by limiting the power of residents to influence the process.

In the 1990's, it took a receiver appointed by the federal court to fix the Housing Authority. If the District is serious about reforming the agency without court involvement or federal government receivership, it must address the structural problems by creating true accountability, independence, and by giving residents and those on the waiting lists a powerful voice in the process.

We strongly urge the Council to act with urgency, but only after hearing directly from residents and experts on what it will take to achieve true lasting reform. We recognize that the

Council has a busy calendar before the end of the session, but given the serious impact that any legislation regarding the Housing Authority will have on tens of thousands of low-income District residents, rushing through legislation that is poorly conceived and inadequately considered would be a mistake.

The Council should, in the next few weeks, hold legislative roundtables at Housing Authority properties and hear directly from the people most impacted by the mismanagement. In addition, there should be a roundtable of national experts on what structural changes are most likely to bring real and lasting change. The Council should not be fooled by the notion that taking action for the sake of acting will yield progress.

We stand ready to assist the Council during this critical time for the District and its residents.

Sincerely,



Executive Director



Supervising Housing Counsel

CC: Councilmember Kenyan R. McDuffie, Chair Pro Tempore
Councilmember Anita Bonds
Councilmember Elissa Silverman
Councilmember Robert C. White
Councilmember Christina Henderson
Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau
Councilmember Brooke Pinto
Councilmember Mary M. Cheh
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Councilmember Vincent C. Gray
Councilmember Trayon White, Sr.