



**Howard County Council Public Hearing  
February 16, 2016**

**Council Bill 12-2016**

Good evening Chairman Ball, Vice Chairperson Weinstein and Council members. As President of the Association of Community Services, it is my privilege to offer testimony on behalf of our 115 nonprofit member organizations and community advocates who work diligently on behalf of over 200,000 County residents each year.

Let me begin by recognizing the participation and contributions to the Joint Task Force to the Departments of Housing and Citizens Service of ACS Executive Director Joan Driessen. In addition, throughout the Task Force process, we solicited and had the opportunity to share with the Task Force the perspectives of ACS nonprofit member leadership.

The essence of ACS's perspective regarding the proposed bill is that reorganization in and of itself cannot achieve the stated goals of "reducing homelessness and fostering self-sufficiency" and ensuring that low income and special populations will "receive comprehensive, sustainable support." These goals will be achieved only through implementation strategies that assure informed and experienced leadership, seamless transition of program staff, full transition of programmatic resources, and perhaps additional resources.

We recognize that today as Council members you are being asked only to consider a plan for structural reorganization. Should you eventually approve the proposed changes, however, we ask that you also make a commitment to help with implementation as you consider the FY 2017 capital and operating budgets and over the longer term, other transportation and housing-related management, constituent and policy issues with which you will be dealing. A few specific thoughts:

- As DCS manages the absorption of DHCD programs and staff, it will be critical that the associated program funds, in addition to personnel support, also convey to DCS for the Community Development Block Grant, HOME, Community Legacy, Rental Assistance and Housing Repair programs.
- Greater Housing Commission autonomy may accelerate the availability of much needed affordable and accessible housing for families with incomes below \$50,000, seniors and the physically disabled. With that autonomy however must come mechanisms that assure Housing Commission transparency and community engagement.
- If housing programmatic responsibilities are to be intermingled with other Department of Citizen Service functions, it is essential to avoid the unintended consequences of increased bureaucracy, decreased transparency and/or a lack of government focus on housing as perhaps the most critical element of "fostering self-sufficiency."
- We are hopeful that, similar to DCS development of the Aging Master Plan, the anticipated synergies of bringing together the statutory housing programs with current DCS human and social service programs will result in development of a broad strategic, county-wide housing policy serving very low and low income households. Such a plan can only be achieved with leadership commitment and resources.

Our county population continues to include over 20,000 households that earn less than \$50,000 a year. There's a shortage of 6700 units of affordable housing for these households. There's a further shortage of accessible housing for our seniors and physically disabled neighbors.

The proposed reorganization is an opportunity to re-energize public and private leadership to find housing solutions for these families. But we should not lose sight of the fact that reorganization would be just a first step. The real potential of any reorganization will only be achieved by increasing County and community commitment to fundamental public policy challenges through sound implementation, appropriate resourcing and community engagement.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on behalf of Howard County's nonprofit community.

Respectfully,

**Tom Meachum**

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President