



SeniorLAW Center

Protecting the Rights of Older Pennsylvanians

Testimony before Council of the City of Philadelphia,
Committee on Finance

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Wendy E. Bookler, Esquire
Legal Director

SeniorLAW Center

1500 JFK Blvd., Suite 1501

Philadelphia, PA 19102

215-988-1244

1-877-727-7529 Pennsylvania SeniorLAW Helpline

www.seniorlawcenter.org

Thank you, Chairwoman Blackwell and members of the Finance Committee, for this opportunity to provide SeniorLAW Center's perspective on the critical need to fund housing programs and access to justice for Philadelphia's older adults.

We know that you all join us in believing that our parents, grandparents, senior veterans of WWII, Korea and Vietnam, and all older Philadelphians who built our great City deserve our attention, respect and enhanced responses and services. I am here to tell you that older people in our City are struggling. Almost 1 in 2 Philadelphia seniors lives deeply in or near poverty levels. We have the poorest senior community in the country. And one of the largest. Seniors need your attention and they need our services to help them: to live safe, healthy lives of independence and dignity, not languish in poverty, abuse, exploitation, homelessness. We are here to ask that you ensure that older Philadelphians are made a priority in the City's Housing Plan.

SeniorLAW Center is an independent nonprofit organization that protects the rights of older Pennsylvanians. We are the only nonprofit organization dedicated to providing legal protection to Pennsylvania senior citizens and we are the primary provider of legal services for older tenants and homeowners in Philadelphia. Our attorneys provide free critically-needed legal assistance to thousands of seniors each year, with our greatest percentage of requested services being those of older adults facing housing crises. We also run the only statewide legal helpline geared toward Pennsylvania residents who are 60 and older, reaching all 67 counties on all civil legal issues affecting their lives, including homeownership rights and tenants' rights. We receive over 200 calls *per week* for assistance from some of the most vulnerable citizens in our Commonwealth.

I would like to briefly share a few statistics regarding seniors in Philadelphia that demonstrate the potential impact of increased funding for housing programs for this community. Among the ten largest cities in the United States, Philadelphia has the highest percentage of seniors and the second-highest percentage of seniors in poverty, with 42% of seniors disabled. Over 82,000 in Pennsylvania alone are also raising grandchildren, great-grandchildren or other children at risk; their homes are often the homes of intergenerational families and the impact of homelessness has impact on *many* generations. In Philadelphia, almost half of all renters spend more than a third of all household income on rent. 28.4% of Philadelphia homeowners spend more than a third of monthly household income toward mortgage payments. Seniors face particular challenges to mitigating the negative consequences of this significant financial burden. The mean annual Social Security income in Philadelphia is \$15,944 and the mean retirement income is \$20,535. Even with these basic public benefits which serve as the most common sources of individual income for seniors, 18.8% of seniors in Philadelphia, almost 1 in 5, live below the federal poverty level, with 24.4% at less than 125% of the poverty level and almost 1 in 2 living below 200% of poverty. National research demonstrates that, at this level of income, seniors struggle to pay for one or more of the expenses of daily living: food, medicine, shelter. It is clear from these statistics that housing costs, whether toward rent or mortgage payments, are a huge drain on our poorest, oldest population of Philadelphians.

The City's recent Housing Action Plan identifies several potential programs that would help meet the existing crisis in senior housing in our City. For homeowners, the Plan identifies several programs which would significantly benefit our seniors, such as a low income senior tax

freeze and income-based real estate tax abatement for longtime homeowners. While property tax assistance programs can help ease the financial burden on senior homeowners, the City must also replenish the Housing Trust Fund. One time HTF payments averaging \$3000 were used last year to reinstate forward and reverse mortgages for senior homeowners who fell behind on mortgages - often due to unexpected medical bills, the death of a family member with the attendant funeral and burial costs and emergency home repairs. Working with the housing counselor network, SeniorLAW Center used these emergency funds to save homes for seniors and their disabled adult children, to reinstate mortgages that were delinquent due to nonpayment of property taxes and homeowner's insurance premiums. We encourage the Finance Committee to allocate increased funding for this essential program.

As you, Chairwoman Blackwell and all City Councilmembers know well, thousands of Philadelphia properties have "tangled titles," meaning the people residing in properties do not appear as record owner in the Philadelphia land records. These properties are often referred to as "family homes" since many generations, often going back to the early 1900s, have been raised in these homes whose deeds remain in the name of long deceased grandparents or aunts and uncles. If the current generation residing in the house does not appear on the title, deed theft and deed fraud becomes a real threat making it easier for impostors to convey properties to third parties. The residents of these "family homes" often face great obstacles when they try to apply for City-sponsored property tax, home repair services and utility assistance programs. SeniorLAW Center is working hard to keep up with the demand that comes from seniors asking us for legal services needed to probate the estate of a deceased relative and transfer the deed to the resident. If the city is serious about its efforts to repair homes to make them safe and

habitable and thereby prevent homelessness, resources must be provided to SLC to help these elderly residents.

From a landlord-tenant perspective, the Plan recommends and we applaud its discussion of eviction prevention as a major policy goal and a foundation for multiple programs, highlighted by the anticipated launch of an eviction diversion program similar to Philadelphia's nationally-acclaimed Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program in which SeniorLAW Center has been pleased to participate on behalf of older homeowners in the City of Philadelphia, with the goal of maintaining homeownership of individuals and stability of neighborhoods. SeniorLAW Center is a leader in providing legal services to low-income older tenants and proud to be a partner in the Philadelphia Eviction Prevention Project. Low-income tenants need enhanced services, particularly those who are older and facing the challenges of aging and poverty.

Development of this Eviction Diversion Program, to provide tenants at risk of eviction with free legal assistance to avoid eviction proceedings as well as with access to pre-trial mediation and housing and budget counseling, as currently works successfully in the Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program, would go a long way toward alleviating the existing landlord-tenant crisis in Philadelphia. Development of an Emergency Homeless Prevention Program with Flexible Rental Assistance would also support this goal.

The particular challenges faced by low-income seniors, such as mobility, disability, access to food and medicine, isolation and attachment to community over a lifetime, exacerbate the already overwhelming consequences of eviction, but at the same time illustrate the potential positive impact of this type of program. Many seniors have lived in their homes for decades and likely do not have the funds necessary to pay for a move or storage of their

lifetimes of possessions, let alone to complete the process of becoming a new tenant somewhere else. The high percentage of disabled Philadelphia seniors, almost half, further demonstrates the practical obstacles to relocation. One of the consequences of the opioid crisis has been an increase in the number of seniors raising grandchildren, which reveals the impact eviction can have on those beyond just our senior population. Housing stability is an essential need for our City and this Plan, if funded, will have a significant impact toward that stabilization. In order to stem the tide of massive evictions in Philadelphia, increased funding must be specifically devoted to programs such as the Philadelphia Eviction Prevention Project that have already proven helpful in this area. Early data shows the success of this project in providing counsel for previously-unrepresented tenants facing eviction on Landlord-Tenant Court. A dedicated allocation of funding to this and similar initiatives would provide increased support for eviction prevention efforts that can benefit not just seniors, but tenants throughout our city. Please ensure that senior tenants get the targeted services they need through this project.

Increased funding will also enable existing programs that have strained to more effectively meet demand to reach a much broader base of seniors in need. For instance, with the demand for new, affordable senior housing skyrocketing, increased funding for programs that help keep seniors in their current homes can stem the flow of seniors into this group. One such program, the SeniorLAW Center Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Court Triage project, provides critical help to housing counselors and homeowners 60 years and older who are facing mortgage and reverse mortgage foreclosure. Last year, however, in the first eight months of our contract with DHCD, the invoices for this program represented 100% of its contract funding,

leaving us to cover the expense ourselves for the remainder of the contract yet. DHCD funding was consequently too limited to pay for these services in 4 of the 12 months of the year, April, May, June, and July. Although SeniorLAW continued to handle Diversion cases both in court and out during the final quarter of the year, the use of other funding sources was necessary to keep this program alive and functioning. Increased funding for SeniorLAW Center's homeownership services is critically needed. The excellence and impact of our work is demonstrated. The older homeowner population and their needs will only continue to grow as 10,000 Americans turn 65 *each day*. Initiatives such as this one not only directly benefit the Philadelphia senior community through its services, but also indirectly ease demand for affordable senior housing and similar programs in the future.

I know you join us in believing that the seniors in our City are in need of and deserving of significantly increased assistance and resources to protect and maintain their homes, and enable them to age in place in the communities they love. With the new availability of funds from the Housing Trust Fund Non-Recording Fee Sub-Fund, we ask each of you and all of our City leaders to make a demonstrable commitment that we value the seniors of Philadelphia – those who came before us, and upon whose shoulders we all stand. We stand ready to work with you.

Thank you.