

**TESTIMONY OF CHRISTOPHER C. HOUSTON
ON BEHALF OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF HOUSING AND
REDEVELOPMENT AGENCIES
PRESENTED BEFORE THE
PENNSYLVANIA SENATE URBAN AFFAIRS AND HOUSING COMMITTEE
OCTOBER 14, 2010
HARRISBURG, PA**

Chairman Yaw, Vice Chair Argall, Minority Chair Kitchen, and members of the Committee, my name is Christopher Houston. I am the Assistant Director of the Housing Authority of the County of Cumberland and an attorney.

I wish to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today concerning the operations and oversight of housing authorities, as you respond to what has happened at the Philadelphia Housing Authority. I think it is important for you to hear how an authority that communicates successfully with its appointing municipal body operates, so that you can take that into consideration if and when changes are made to the Housing Authorities Law.

The Cumberland County Housing Authority was established in 1956. Our Authority operates on a countywide basis in Cumberland County and, pursuant to a cooperation agreement, in Perry County. We own and operate 209 units of family and senior public housing, administer approximately 1300 Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, and operate a number of programs for persons with special needs and those who were formerly homeless. Our authority and our sister agency, the Redevelopment Authority of the County of Cumberland, have been recognized by the Pennsylvania Association of Housing and Redevelopment Agencies (PAHRA) and the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Organizations as innovative leaders in our industry.

We are proud to say that we have always had an excellent working relationship with our county commissioners. Pursuant to the Housing Authorities Law, it is the county commissioners that appoint the members to our five-person board. One of the board members is a representative of the population that we serve. The commissioners appoint one of the commissioners as a liaison to our board. That commissioner regularly attends our board meetings and is encouraged to engage in discussions during board meetings. This close working relationship with the county extends to other county departments, namely the planning department, aging and community services, and MH/MR. All of these departments work closely with us on various projects and activities that serve the interests of not only county government, but also its citizens in need of our services and programs.

It is important to note that the Housing Authorities Law specifically provides that an authority is not “deemed to be an instrumentality” of the city or county which formed it and that it is not to be “engaged in the performance of a municipal function.” In other words, authorities are not to be part and parcel of municipal government, but are instead

to serve the public as an autonomous entity in furtherance of their powers under the law. We feel that it is critically important to keep the self-directed nature of an authority intact.

We are, frankly, concerned over the fact that what has happened at the Philadelphia Housing Authority will cause unwanted changes to the Housing Authorities Law, which would adversely impact our operations. We are already subject to close oversight by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and to, potentially, add additional layers of regulatory control and administrative burdens will further strain our already limited financial resources.

That having been said, we understand the desire to act in response to what happened in Philadelphia. We ask that PAHRA and its membership be actively engaged in any effort to amend the current law. It seems to us that legislative changes, if any, should be directed at fostering open communication between the appointing governmental entity and the board of the authority. Ironically, open communication has worked well in our county for many decades without any legislative directives.

Thank you.