

Testimony of Zacchary Powell In Support of H.B. 7297
Before the Planning & Development Committee of the Connecticut Legislature
Wednesday, March 22, 2017

Good Afternoon, Chairs, Ranking Members, and Members of the Planning & Development Committee. My name is Zacchary Powell, and I am writing to you to express my full support for H.B. 7297.

During my time as an analyst at Open Communities Alliance, I have had the privilege of working with clients with a Housing Choice Voucher. One of the housing authorities with which we partnered was in the town of Fairfield. I spoke with many of the thirteen families who received a voucher for the first time — having been on the waitlist for eight or more years — and they were excited at the prospect of being able to move their families to a high-opportunity town, where the streets are safe and the schools were highly-resourced. Soon after getting their voucher, however, they were struck by the severe lack of units available — even with the assistance of a voucher. After hearing so many of these stories of daily struggle that caused one voucher recipient to tell me “I don’t know if I can handle the stress of this anymore; I’m ready to give up,” OCA decided to conduct a rent study.

In our study, OCA looked at all units advertised on Apartments.com and Zillow.com with rents no higher than the subsidy given for a four-bedroom apartment. In the town of Fairfield, this search provided a list of seventy-nine total units from studio to four-bedroom. Of that list, only six units had the potential of being affordable with a Housing Choice Voucher: 1 one-bedroom, 4 two-bedrooms, and 1 four-bedroom. This finding was shocking, and it affirmed the consternation expressed by the voucher holders with whom we spoke.

But, Fairfield is not alone. Many other high-opportunity towns have a jarringly low number of available affordable units. In our complete study, OCA found similar trends across the state: Greenwich had only five units that were affordable to HCV holders; Westport had none; Glastonbury had one; Farmington had seven; and Simsbury had only three.

This dearth of affordable housing units in our state’s high-opportunity towns means many families are unable to choose where to live. In the case of the thirteen families who received a voucher in Fairfield, only five were ultimately able to find housing. That means eight families who have been waiting for this chance to move for almost a decade lost their voucher. H.B. 7297 is the first step toward providing low-income families with a choice. It requires that the State gather more specific data on the housing needs, leading to better, more targeted planning. As well, it reinstates the 1991 statute that allows for a private right of action in order to ensure the State is affirmatively furthering fair housing, acting as a traffic cop — if you will — to guide our government agencies in the right direction.

Affordable housing is essential to Connecticut’s vibrancy and prosperity. H.B. 7297 seeks to ensure that we continue the work that we have started and push beyond the current expectations. That way, we can more adequately tailor our efforts to the ever-increasing need for affordable housing units. I urge you to pass H.B. 7297 out of committee.

Thank you!