

Testimony of

Ivory N. Mathews,

Interim Executive Director

Housing Authority of the City of Columbia, South Carolina

Before the United States Senate Committee on

Banking, Housing & Urban Affairs

November 7, 2019

Carbon Monoxide Alarms Leading Every Resident to Safety Act of 2019

Chairman Crapo, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify during today's critically important hearing in support of the Carbon Monoxide Alarms Leading Every Resident to Safety Act of 2019 (CO ALERTS Act of 2019).

My name is Ivory Mathews, and I am the Interim Executive Director of the Housing Authority of the City of Columbia, South Carolina.

I am here to today to support increased access to carbon monoxide detectors in federally-assisted rental housing through the CO ALERTS legislation. The legislation ensures families living in federally assisted housing are safer from carbon monoxide poisoning by requiring:

- Carbon monoxide alarms in Section 202, Section 811, Public Housing, and Section 8 federally assisted housing, in accordance with Chapters 9 and 11 of the International Fire Code (IFC). The IFC requires carbon monoxide alarms in units that have potential carbon monoxide sources like gas-fired appliances, fireplaces, forced air furnaces, and attached garages;
- Carbon monoxide alarms in Sections 514 and 515 rural housing, in accordance with Chapters 9 and 11 of the IFC;
- HUD to provide guidance to public housing agencies on how to educate tenants on health hazards in the home, including carbon monoxide poisoning and lead poisoning; and
- HUD, in consultation with the Consumer Product Safety Commission, to conduct a public study on requiring carbon monoxide alarms in housing not covered by the IFC.

Established in 1937, the Housing Authority of the City of Columbia, South Carolina, (Columbia Housing) is the largest housing authority in the state of South Carolina. Columbia Housing was formed to provide federally subsidized affordable housing to low-income families.

Since 1937 Columbia Housing has provided housing assistance to low income families in Richland County, South Carolina, utilizing traditional programs, including Public Housing and Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) funded by the United States Department of Housing

and Urban Development (HUD). In recent years, Columbia Housing has updated ten percent of its housing portfolio with modern mixed-income developments and continues to search for ways to expand affordable housing throughout the City and County.

Today, we provide rental assistance to over 6,000 families through the HCV Program, Public Housing program, and properties that we own and/or manage. Columbia Housing owns and/or manages a real estate portfolio of 36 traditional Public Housing communities with 1,684 units, seven Mixed Finance/Low Income Housing Tax Credit communities totaling 425 units, and ten market rate workforce housing communities consisting of 249 units. In addition to these multi-family rental communities, Columbia Housing administers 4,031 tenant-based vouchers including 414 HUD-VASH (Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing) vouchers, and 200 Mainstream Vouchers. Columbia Housing also administers resident support and service programs under various HUD and non-HUD grants, which include the Resident Opportunities and Self-Sufficiency (ROSS) program, the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program, the Housing Opportunities for Persons with Aids (HOPWA) program, the Continuum of Care (CoC) program, and a First-Time Homebuyers Program.

I would like to begin my testimony this morning by honoring Calvin Witherspoon, Jr. and Derrick Caldwell Roper, who lost their lives as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning on January 17, 2019, at the Allen Benedict Court Public Housing community in Columbia. Our deepest sympathies are with the Witherspoon and Roper families, and we are here today in memory of these individuals.

On January 18, 2019, over 400 Allen Benedict Court public housing tenants were evacuated from their homes out of an abundance of caution. An emergency relocation plan was implemented to secure replacement housing for the families and to minimize, to the greatest extent possible, the hardships faced by the families who were being permanently displaced.

All residents were offered the option of being temporarily housed at area hotels. While most residents selected that option, a few elected to temporarily relocate with friends or family members. Columbia Housing also worked with area school districts to coordinate transportation

and secure special permission for primary and secondary school age children who were being housed in eight hotels and new residences outside of their school zones in order to remain in those school districts for the remainder of the school year. We also secured temporary housing for pets. We worked with pet hotels and animal shelters to care for residents' pets until new suitable pet-friendly housing was secured. Columbia Housing worked diligently to assess and meet the individual needs of each family.

The health and safety of our residents remained our highest priority during this time. Columbia Housing partnered with the South Carolina Association of Social Workers to provide residents with free behavioral health sessions that would help to offset day-to-day stressors associated with their emergency relocation. Wrap-around services were also provided by City and County governments to help with associated costs and inconveniences like laundry services, transportation to places of worship, transportation to doctor's appointments, food preparation, and afterschool activities. Donated cash, gift cards, volunteer hours, goods, and services were provided by area colleges and universities, social groups, sororities and fraternities, faith-based communities, and private citizens.

After the emergency relocation, Columbia Housing worked diligently to ensure that the impacted families were quickly moved to permanent housing. Housing options provided to families included other available public housing units and Housing Choice Vouchers to secure permanent housing in the open market in efforts to eliminate any rent burden on the families. Columbia Housing later received an allocation of 237 new tenant-protection vouchers (TPVs) on February 23, 2019 from HUD in an effort to assist families with securing permanent affordable housing. This amount was enough to provide all families residing in Allen Benedict Court with a TPV. All costs affiliated with the moves for each family were paid by Columbia Housing in accordance with the Uniform Relocation Act requirements. Columbia Housing remains grateful for the outpouring of support received from the community and the South Carolina HUD Field Office.

Construction began on Allen Benedict Court on June 30, 1939 and was funded with a development grant provided under the low-rent public housing program. The community

consisted of 244 townhome units in 26 buildings on a 15-acre site located adjacent to Benedict College and Allen University, historically black educational institutions founded in the late 1800s.

The 1970s brought a new vision to federal housing assistance as several new programs were developed to subsidize privately owned rental properties and the Brooke Amendment capped tenant contributions toward rent at 25 percent of family income. Policy changes, partnered with market changes, such as the post-war housing boom and increasing rates of homeownership resulted in public housing serving the poorest tenants. Although Congress eventually began providing operating and capital subsidies, and tenant rent contributions increased to 30 percent of tenant income, these funds have never been sufficient to adequately operate and maintain the properties. Congress has underfunded the Capital and Operating fund for the public housing program for decades.

During the 1980s, concern continued to grow about the state of the existing public housing stock—both the physical soundness as well as the social health of public housing communities.

In 1992, the HOPE VI Program was developed as a result of recommendations by the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing, which was charged with proposing a National Action Plan to eradicate severely distressed public housing. The Commission recommended revitalization in three general areas: physical improvements, management improvements, and social and community services to address resident needs.

Columbia Housing redeveloped its largest public housing community, Saxon Homes, under the HOPE VI program using multiple mixed-finance methods. The new community includes 93 homeownership units and 196 mixed-income units.

In 2005, Columbia Housing, working with a planning firm, formed a Master Plan to redevelop Allen Benedict Court and stimulate private reinvestment in the neighborhood under the HOPE VI Program. Columbia Housing applied for the very competitive HOPE VI program in 2006,

2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010. Columbia Housing did not receive a HOPE VI grant for Allen Benedict Court.

In 2012, Columbia Housing applied for and was successful in receiving a Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant for the redevelopment of Allen Benedict neighborhood. The Choice Neighborhoods Initiative promotes a comprehensive approach to transforming distressed areas of concentrated poverty into viable and sustainable mixed-income neighborhoods. Choice Neighborhoods links housing improvements with necessary services for the people who live there. This includes schools, public transit, and employment opportunities.

In 2017 and 2018, Columbia Housing applied for a Choice Neighborhoods Implementation Grant. The Choice Neighborhoods Implementation Grant supports those communities that have undergone a comprehensive local planning process and are ready to implement their “Transformation Plan” to redevelop the neighborhood. The implementation grant would have assisted Columbia Housing in the redevelopment of Allen Benedict homes and transformation of the surrounding community. Unfortunately, Columbia Housing was not successful in receiving a Choice Neighborhoods Implementation Grant.

After years of seeking special funding for the redevelopment of Allen Benedict Court, based on the condition of the property, Columbia Housing had no option but to seek demolition for the property under HUD’s Section 18 Demolition/Disposition provisions. The demolition will occur upon the conclusion of ongoing investigations related to the carbon monoxide leak. Although residents will not move back into Allen Benedict Court, Columbia Housing assisted all displaced residents through placement at other public housing properties or through a TPV.

It is the greatest desire of the City of Columbia and Columbia Housing to transform the Allen Benedict Court community along with its adjacent neighbors to the site, Benedict College and Allen University. However, we do not have the financial resources to move forward with the redevelopment. We will continue to work through a joint public private partnership utilizing all available resources in the private sector to develop a new community that will once again provide a safe and healthy living environment for families and children.

On April 18, 2019, HUD sent a Public and Indian Housing (PIH) Notice to all public housing authorities and private owners of HUD-subsidized housing reminding and encouraging agencies to maintain working carbon monoxide detectors when required by local regulations. The notice further encouraged owners operating in areas without such regulations to consider installing detectors. This notice was issued as a part of Secretary Carson's efforts to support decent, safe and sanitary housing in HUD's low-income housing assistance programs and to protect families living in federally subsidized housing from potentially deadly carbon monoxide.

Today, there is an estimated \$70 billion-dollar backlog of capital needs for the Public Housing stock which continues to grow at approximately \$3.5 billion per year. This backlog includes many health and safety items. The 2019 Appropriations Act, enacted on February 15, 2019, set-aside \$30 million dollars of Capital Funds for emergencies and natural disasters. Not less than \$10 million of this set-aside must be used for emergency capital needs related to safety and security measures. HUD subsequently set aside \$5 million of this \$10 million to purchase, install, repair and replace carbon monoxide detectors. These funds are very important to affordable housing providers' ability to adequately comply with measures that will facilitate a safer home for all. Additional funding is critical to ensure all public housing authorities are able to purchase needed carbon monoxide detectors.

Columbia Housing installed carbon monoxide detectors throughout its public housing properties prior to the notice of funding availability.

As referenced in a correspondence from Senator Tim Scott and Senator Robert Menendez to the HUD Secretary Ben Carson, "unfortunately, this type of incident [carbon monoxide poisoning] is not isolated to Columbia, South Carolina. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over 50,000 people go to the emergency room every year due to carbon monoxide poisoning. The most vulnerable of our populations are the most at risk, including children, elderly individuals, and people with disabilities." This is why Columbia Housing, along with the City of Columbia, South Carolina; South Carolina Housing Authority Executive Directors

Association; and the Carolinas Council of Housing Redevelopment Codes Officials support the CO ALERTS Act of 2019 (letters of support are attached).

Chairman Crapo, Ranking Member Brown, members of the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, I am honored to have had this opportunity to testify before the Committee and provide a perspective on the importance of the CO ALERTS ACT of 2019. This concludes my testimony. It is my pleasure to answer any questions you may have.

October 30, 2019

The Honorable Tim Scott
717 Hart Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Scott,

On behalf of the Housing Authority of the City of Columbia's ("Columbia Housing") Board of Commissioners and staff, we are sending this letter in support of the Carbon Monoxide Alarms Leading Every Resident to Safety Act (CO ALERTS Act of 2019) bill. Providing a safe place to call home for all of our residents and program participants is our highest priority.

CO ALERTS Act of 2019 ensures families living in federally assisted housing are safe from carbon monoxide poisoning by requiring:

- Carbon monoxide alarms in Section 202, Section 811, Public Housing, and Section 8 federally assisted housing, in accordance with Chapters 9 and 11 of the International Fire Code (IFC). The IFC requires carbon monoxide alarms in units that have potential carbon monoxide sources like gas-fired appliances, fireplaces, forced air furnaces, and attached garages;
- Carbon monoxide alarms in Sections 514 and 515 rural housing, in accordance with Chapters 9 and 11 of the IFC;
- HUD provide guidance to public housing agencies on how to educate tenants on health hazards in the home, including carbon monoxide poisoning and lead poisoning; and
- HUD, in consultation with the Consumer Product Safety Commission, conducts a public study on requiring carbon monoxide alarms in housing not covered by the IFC.

We are also pleased to have our interim executive director, Ivory N. Mathews testify before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs on November 7, 2019 in support of this very important bill.

Sincerely,



Ernest W. Cromartie
Chairman
Housing Authority of the City of Columbia, SC - Board of Commissioners

Copy

Lila Nieves-Lee, Legislative Assistant, Senator Tim Scott's Capitol Hill Office
SC Housing Authorities



CITY OF COLUMBIA
SOUTH CAROLINA
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

November 6, 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

On behalf of the citizens of the City of Columbia and as the 36th mayor, I would like to extend this letter in support of the Carbon Monoxide Alarms Leading Every Resident to Safety Act (CO ALERTS Act of 2019) bill. Providing a safe place to call home for all of our residents and program participants is our highest priority.

On January 17, 2019, our community suffered the tragic loss of Mr. Calvin Witherspoon, Jr., and Mr. Derrick Caldwell Roper. Due to an abundance of concern for carbon monoxide poisoning, the Columbia Housing Authority evacuated over 400 tenants.

The bipartisan legislation, co-sponsored by Senator Tim Scott (R-SC) and Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) ensures carbon monoxide alarms in federally assisted homes that have potential carbon monoxide sources, such as gas-fired appliances, fireplaces, forced-air furnaces, and attached garages. The bill directs HUD to provide guidance to public housing agencies on how to educate tenants on health hazards in the home, including carbon monoxide poisoning and lead poisoning, and it instructs HUD to conduct a public study with the Consumer Product Safety Commission on requiring carbon monoxide alarms in housing not covered by the International Fire Code.

I firmly support the placement of carbon monoxide monitors in publicly assisted housing and believe it will ensure the safety of our community's citizens.

Sincerely,

Stephen K. Benjamin
Mayor
Columbia, SC



South Carolina Association
Of
Housing Authority Executive Directors

October 30, 2019

The Honorable Tim Scott
717 Hart Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Scott,

On behalf of the South Carolina Association of Housing Authority Executive Directors, we are sending this letter in support of the Carbon Monoxide Alarms Leading Every Resident to Safety Act (CO ALERTS Act of 2019) bill. Providing a safe place to call home for all of our residents and program participants is our highest priority.

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- HUD, in consultation with the Consumer Product Safety Commission, conducts a public study on requiring carbon monoxide alarms in housing not covered by the IFC.

We are also excited to have our colleague Ivory N. Mathews, interim executive director of the Housing Authority of the City of Columbia testify before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs on November 7, 2019 in support of this very important bill.

Sincerely,

Angela R. Childers
President | South Carolina Association of Housing Authority Executive Directors

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Lila Nieves-Lee, Legislative Assistant, Senator Tim Scott's Capitol Hill Office

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October 30, 2019

The Honorable Tim Scott
717 Hart Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Scott,

On behalf of the Carolinas Council of Housing, Redevelopment and Codes Officials (CCHRCO), we are sending this letter in support of the Carbon Monoxide Alarms Leading Every Resident to Safety Act (CO ALERTS Act of 2019) bill. CCHRCO is an affordable housing trade organization with its membership consisting mostly of North and South Carolina housing authorities. Providing a safe place to call home for all of our residents and program participants is our highest priority.

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Sincerely,

Vivian Perry
President of the Carolinas Council of Housing Redevelopment & Codes Officials

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Lila Nieves-Lee, Legislative Assistant, Senator Tim Scott's Capitol Hill Office
SC Housing Authorities