

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 21, 2019

The Honorable Ben Carson
Secretary
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
451 7th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20410

Dear Secretary Carson:

We write to urge the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) support for: (1) preserving adequate inventory of affordable, accessible housing in the city of Hartford's North End; (2) revamping the inspection process to more quickly and consistently identify and correct health, safety and other maintenance issues; and (3) providing more robust relocation services that provide mobility counseling and sufficient time for tenants to find secure, quality housing.

We have all personally viewed and discussed the living conditions at Barbour Gardens with its tenants. The extent of severe health and safety violations and the lack of response by the property owners and by HUD is stunning. These same conditions were apparent at Infill 1 and Clay Arsenal. In each of these properties, the owners failed to properly maintain their housing units, resulting in significant health and safety issues. The tenants should not have had to endure such horrific conditions. In the most recent HUD inspection, Barbour Gardens scored a 9 out of 100. And Infill 1 had scores of 53 or below in 8 of the 12 inspections since 1999.

Recent, welcomed enforcement action by HUD has resulted in the termination of Section 8 contracts in Clay Arsenal, Infill 1 and Barbour Gardens. We applaud the local HUD office's actions that send a strong message to other Section 8 landlords in the region to maintain their properties appropriately or lose their Section 8 funding. In the long term, Hartford residents will benefit from such enforcement.

However, the city's North End will lose 280 units of affordable housing because of these actions. We urge HUD to provide sufficient funding through Section 8 and other affordable housing programs to encourage private developers of quality affordable housing to replace at least the same number of units that have been lost.

The need for affordable housing, along with an equitable mix of affordable and market rate housing, is significant especially in the greater Hartford region. We are willing to work with HUD, state and local governments and private organizations to facilitate the restoration of these 280 units and urge HUD to actively participate in helping the city improve these neighborhoods through housing and non-housing resources.

We also urge HUD to create a more robust and fair relocation assistance program after hearing from tenants who were confused by the changing deadlines and the lack of information. Offering mobility counseling would provide individuals with the resources necessary to decide whether to remain in their neighborhood or move to another community. Most of these tenants need critical information such as school quality, transportation services and employment opportunities in order to determine where to relocate. HUD must be prepared to accommodate individuals and families on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, during this transition, we urge HUD to be flexible with a relocation time period and allow tenants adequate time to make such a vital decision for themselves and their families.

Finally and crucially, HUD needs to quickly change its inspection process. Clearly, the conditions at these three properties demonstrate the abject failure of the current inspection system. We heard from tenants describing ways in which property owners avoid bad scores without making substantive improvements. The system is obviously broken. Immediate changes must be made.

We are encouraged that HUD has started a pilot program to improve its Real Estate Assessment Center's (REAC) inspections. However, tenants cannot continue to live in conditions like those at Barbour Gardens, Infill 1 and Clay Arsenal while HUD initiates a pilot program in another jurisdiction. Immediate, aggressive inspections must be implemented now as other tenants in the city -- and throughout the region -- very likely may be exposed to similar living conditions.

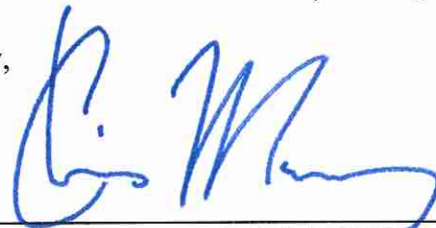
Inspections should ensure that municipal fire, health and building safety officials are consulted and that tenant complaints to those agencies are referred to HUD for its files. Inspectors should also talk with tenants and obtain their input during any inspection. Finally, we urge HUD to utilize existing means to enforce property receivership following continual poor inspection results. This will compel property owners to act and help prevent deficient behavior that has allowed them to profit while their tenants suffer in unhealthy and unsafe conditions.

Thank you for your attention to this vital matter. We look forward to your response.

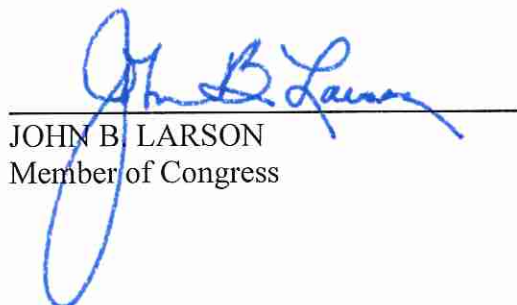
Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate



CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY
United States Senate



JOHN B. LARSON
Member of Congress