

Dear Representative McMorris Rodgers,

We are the Affordable Housing Implementation Task Force, with volunteers from Columbia and Walla Walla counties in southeastern Washington and Milton-Freewater in northeastern Oregon. We are advocating for the implementation of recommendations generated through a community-led study on affordable housing in 2018 and 2019. Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, **our community identified affordable housing as the most pressing challenge in our region.**

**Quick facts from the Community Council *Affordable Housing Study*, published prior to the pandemic:**

- **41%** of households in Columbia and Walla Walla counties that paid rent or a mortgage didn't have affordable housing.
- **50.2%** of renters in Columbia and Walla Walla counties didn't have affordable housing; compared to 46.2% in the United States, and 45.3% in Washington State.

We appreciate your commitment to supporting the health and economic vitality of rural communities in eastern Washington. Like you, we want to make sure that eastern Washington remains a place where people can raise their families and start new businesses. As you know, the health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic threaten livelihoods here. We urge you to make sure that rural Washingtonians are not forgotten or overlooked in legislation crafted to address our nation's economic crisis.

Now with the pandemic widespread in the US, housing instability threatens to worsen public health risks and increase hardship for individual families. These challenges are creating new burdens for already struggling communities. In your next round of legislative negotiations to address the pandemic, we urge you to:

- **Provide emergency funding to USDA Rural Development housing programs so that residents in those programs stay housed;** and
- **Provide emergency rental assistance to keep low-income households stably housed and prevent landlords from future financial difficulties.**

We appreciate that, in the CARES Act, Congress provided some resources to support public housing agencies and keep residents safe and healthy during this crisis. But no funds were included to support housing units developed and/or assisted through USDA Rural Development. As a coalition of residents in rural Washington, we see that our region needs more federal assistance to weather this crisis. In the context of the deteriorating economic outlook, funds are needed for USDA-assisted housing providers and to adjust rental burdens for USDA tenants who are experiencing declines in income. Funds for USDA rural housing need to arrive swiftly and efficiently so residents can stay in their homes and landlords can meet their obligations. Rural Washingtonians need your support.

Our nation is experiencing an unprecedented spike in unemployment, and millions more job losses are expected in the coming months. Before the pandemic, millions of low-income renters in the US were already precariously housed; in our region, 50% of renters already lived in housing they could not afford. Those numbers are likely to grow significantly due to increasing unemployment. When the CARES Act benefits to taxpayers and unemployed workers time out, the vast majority of low-income renters will remain cost-burdened and at-risk of homelessness. Temporary eviction moratoria in Washington are helping renters, but they still allow rent arrears to accumulate. People who have lost income as a result of COVID-19 will struggle to cover large sums of back-rent once it comes due. Emergency rental assistance enables people who have lost jobs to shelter in place and avoid housing instability. To avert an unmitigated surge in housing instability and potential evictions and related public health risks, Congress should provide a substantial amount of emergency rental assistance in the forthcoming COVID-19 bill. Emergency rental assistance is also necessary so that landlords continue to receive rental income, which, in turn, enables them to operate their properties and ensures the continued viability of our country's essential affordable housing infrastructure. If landlords do not receive rent, many will be unable to pay back their loans,

potentially exacerbating the economic crisis. A recent estimate from the National Low Income Housing Coalition shows that \$100 billion is required to keep the lowest-income households stably housed over the next year. For reference, H.R. 6379, introduced on March 23, included \$100 billion in emergency rental assistance, which could serve as a starting point for lawmaker negotiations.

Thank you for your commitment to protecting the health of all Washingtonians, and for considering our recommendations to address housing instability during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.