

James R. Meehan

Regional Housing Coordinator

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Dear Members of the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee,

My name is James Meehan. I am the Regional Housing Coordinator for Futures Community Support Services and the Self Determination Housing Project of Pa. I service a six county region (Bradford, Sullivan, Tioga, Susquehanna, Wyoming and Lycoming counties). Covering such a large area gives me a broad perspective of many different communities. My job is to be the single point of contact between housing providers and agencies that provide services to low income families and people with disabilities. My mission is to develop partnerships to increase the housing options available to those groups.

This region, like most of rural Pennsylvania, historically faces very real barriers to providing decent, affordable and accessible housing.

1. Our housing stock is primarily pre- World War II and is difficult, expensive or impossible to modify to make it accessible to older adults or people with disabilities.
2. The major portion of this area lacks public water and sewer services which make new construction using public funds limited to municipalities which have such infrastructure.
3. Transportation is a major barrier. This region has a rich network of services but they are clustered near towns, which makes housing in outlying areas difficult for older adults and people with disabilities who rely on others for transportation.

4. The supply of decent, affordable and accessible housing has always been in short supply due to those barriers.

This region has an aging population many of which are served very effectively by programs administered by the Area Agency on Aging. But we are seeing a new population of older adults emerging. This group is composed of over 55 individuals and couples who have modest retirement incomes and are looking to sell the old, hard to maintain homes that they own but have out grown since their children have become adults. These people are looking to rent decent, affordable housing that gives them access to the amenities they enjoy i.e. restaurants, golf courses, entertainment and social activities. This is a population that wants to age in place and wants to plan for that while they are still active and healthy. By renting they can hopefully have accessible housing that frees them from the tasks of home maintenance. If we truly advocate for Long Term Living and aging in place, then this population cannot be ignored as they are practicing what we preach. This population has created a demand for a new type of housing.

Approximately two years ago public and private entities came together in a four county region (Bradford, Sullivan, Susquehanna and Tioga) to form a Regional Housing Consortium. The mission of this group was to create partnerships to overcome some of the historic housing barriers. Currently this group has a membership of over 120 members comprised of for profit and nonprofit individuals and entities. In the past private landlords were typically not involved in projects relating to the populations served by public agencies. We have met with private landlords and invited them to join the Consortium. Their response was very positive and because of their participation the Consortium has been able to look at some innovative housing options for the populations we serve i.e. Shared Housing, Master Leasing, Transitional Housing and Eviction Prevention programs.

Unfortunately we face two new and unexpected barriers that have stymied our progress.

1. The downturn in the national economy has affected this whole country. We also have felt the effect of unemployment, under employment, home foreclosures, tax delinquencies and lack of private as well as public funding.

We are not unique in our struggle to overcome and move forward from this situation.

2. The second impact is unique to this region and presents problems, to which, we have no historical base of data to draw upon in finding solutions. The exploration and development of The Marcellus Gas Play has brought a massive new demand on our housing supply.

The possible long term positive benefits to this area from Marcellus Gas activity cannot be denied. As this activity progresses there is much talk and concern about its effect on infrastructure, the environment and the creation of new jobs but very little attention has been given to its effect on housing. The influx of workers has pushed our already strained housing supply to the breaking point. The availability of decent housing has gone from poor to almost nonexistent. Landlords can now get \$3,000 a month for a house that previously rented for \$475. People who are hard working, taxpaying individuals who play by the rules are having their leases not renewed because of the profit to be made by landlords by renting to gas workers. The accepted standard has been that affordable housing should cost approximately 30% of a families' income. This standard no longer applies to the housing market in this region. Families with income well above the poverty level now face challenges as daunting as low income families, older adults and people with disabilities.

The Regional Housing Consortium has proven itself to be an innovative group as far as creating new partnerships for housing. The Consortium finds itself trying to create partnerships to cope with this situation but need more stakeholders at the table.

The impact of Marcellus Gas on housing is largely not understood statewide by people and entities outside this region. We need to make housing a part of the State dialogue along with infrastructure and the environment. We need to recognize that we have an opportunity to create new long term positive housing strategies that recognize the reality of the impact of Marcellus activity and not stick our heads in the ground and pretend that it will go away.

The Regional Housing Consortium recognizes and wants to take advantage of the potential for creating new partnerships to improve our housing situation. Those partnerships need to include new residents as well as long time residents. We look forward to working towards the goal of decent, affordable and accessible housing for all the residents of the region.

Thank you for your consideration of this situation.

Sincerely,

James R. Meehan

Regional Housing Coordinator