

The Committee of 100

on the Federal City



Performance Hearing Office of the Tenant Advocate

March 5, 2021

Chairwoman Anita Bonds:

I am David Marlin, a resident of the District of Columbia of 60 years, now living in Ward 1, and I am testifying today on behalf of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City in support of the important and singular public service performed by the Office of Tenant Advocate (OTA). I had the privilege of serving as a member of the first Rental Housing Commission from 1981-85 as an appointee of Mayor Marion Barry. We adjudicated the first landlord-tenant disputes in rent control at the appellate level to establish program policies and we adopted regulations for this progressive legislation designed to maintain affordable housing in the city. The District government did not provide education, advocacy and legal advice to tenants back then, despite the evident need, so the creation of OTA by the City Council and Mayor Anthony Williams in 2005 was a significant event.

About three years ago, I joined the ranks of the Committee of 100 which has enabled me to assess the progress of DC's rent stabilization program and the effectiveness of the Office of Tenant Advocate. I have been hugely impressed by OTA's service to our thousands of tenants, to the interests of housing providers and to the District government, both the City Council and our mayoralty administrations.

I know this Committee and its able Chairwoman are familiar with OTA's mission and purposes and its numerous accomplishments but I would like to emphasize how OTA has ably performed during this extraordinary pandemic-induced period in our city's life. Let me mention three informational sessions as examples of OTA's outreach to the community.

- On March 23, 2020, in both English and Spanish, when its office had closed, OTA gave instructions on how to access its staff on the internet or by phone with special emphasis on its emergency housing outreach and its educational services.
- On April 9, 2020, OTA provided critical information on the recently enacted freeze on rent increases, changes to the District's notice to vacate and eviction rules, protection against utility cutoffs and mortgage relief.
- On February 4, 2021, OTA held a Roundtable discussion on new legislative prohibitions for evictions. Of course, it has daily provided information to its clientele, which includes tenants, landlords, District officials, District courts and the general public. In my knowledge, this office is unique in the United States and brings credit to us for our wisdom in creating it and to its staff headed by Johanna Shreve.

Last May, I testified before this Committee to urge the restoration of budget cuts so that OTA's 2015 legislative mandate of creating a database could proceed. OTA is the ideal organization to conduct this survey which will make available to city agencies, lawmakers and the general public, for the first time, full information about rent-stabilized housing in the District which contains approximately 80,000 units. The law requires, for example, a description of rental buildings and each unit within, base rents and included services, any vacancies, full identification of housing providers and their licenses, any housing code violations outstanding and the computation of the landlord's rate of return. Additionally, landlord petitions, tenant grievances that have surfaced and resultant court and administrative actions will be readily available from the beginning to the present.

We were gratified that funding was restored to enable OTA to continue assembling the data and equally pleased in the understanding that the database will be completed within the required time frame of the end of this calendar year.

Thank you for the opportunity to endorse the fine work of the District's Office of Tenant Advocate.

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