

HB 759 HOME Act of 2016 - SUPPORT

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My name is Stefanie DeLuca and I am an associate professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins. My research examines the effects of neighborhoods on family and child well-being, as well as the role of housing policies and landlords in shaping where families live and send their children to school. For over fourteen years, I have conducted fieldwork with hundreds of low-income families, children and landlords in five different cities, including Baltimore. I am testifying in support of HB 759, the Home Act of 2016, which will prohibit housing and rental discrimination based on a person's source of income. I support the HOME Act because it has the potential to reduce concentrated poverty and remove a real barrier to families' access to safer neighborhoods with better schools, which can promote upward mobility; thus, the HOME Act may have a positive impact on the long-term educational and socioeconomic prospects of poor children.

1. Living in concentrated poverty is harmful for kids and diminishes social mobility

Over twenty-five years of social science research has converged on a powerful and clear finding: growing up in concentrated poverty reduces children's educational attainment and social mobility.¹ A childhood spent in a neighborhood of concentrated disadvantage reduces the verbal ability of African-American children to the same extent as missing a year of schooling, and can have devastating effects on the odds of graduating from high school.² Once in poor neighborhoods, it is difficult to escape: generations of poor families, especially families of color, become stuck in a cycle of intergenerational poverty, and remain in the same places that perpetuate inequality.³

2. Parents and children benefit when they escape poor neighborhoods and move to high opportunity areas.

I have studied a number of housing interventions that help poor families leave violent neighborhoods with toxic levels of poverty. My research, in combination with compelling new work by a leading team of economists, strongly suggests that when families escape disadvantaged communities, there are large dividends for both parents and children. Parents who move to lower poverty neighborhoods experience mental health improvements on par with best practices in anti-depressant medication therapies, as well as reductions in the risk of diabetes and obesity.⁴ When they become adults, children who spent their childhoods in lower-poverty areas earn significantly more and are more likely to attend college, get married and raise their children in low poverty communities than their peers growing up in high poverty areas.⁵ When assisted with housing vouchers and mobility counseling, parents who move to higher opportunity neighborhoods are more likely to keep their families there in the long run, in part because their children have access to higher quality schools.⁶ Recent evidence also suggests that exposure to high quality neighborhoods and schools can also increase the academic achievement of poor students in the short-run.⁷

3. Landlord refusal to accept vouchers is a substantial barrier to families entering lower poverty neighborhoods with better schools.

I have spoken with hundreds of families with vouchers in Maryland and all over the country, and have accompanied some of them on their housing searches. Even an eight-hour day spent driving around with a team

of sociologists is not enough to ensure that a poor parent can even get a lead on a decent housing unit anywhere, let alone secure affordable housing in a safe neighborhood with good schools. Many families call landlords and immediately ask them whether they take vouchers, trying to avoid the embarrassment and wasted time of visiting a unit and applying, only to be turned down.⁸ When families find themselves with a voucher, a history of landlord rejection and limited search time, they rarely gamble on the longer, more difficult process of finding housing in more affluent areas. Many poor families are so demoralized and panicked that they take the first unit that someone is willing to lease to them, regardless of what kind of neighborhood it is in. Some will take units sight unseen, just to avoid running out of time on their vouchers and risking homelessness; unsurprisingly, most of these units are usually in a metro areas poorest and most segregated neighborhoods.

4. In the absence of source of income protection, families with vouchers are left with few good neighborhood options.

In Baltimore and elsewhere, desperate voucher holders are often vulnerable to landlords who aggressively recruit them into high poverty neighborhoods.⁹ Families have told me that they do not believe that they are allowed to use their vouchers in more affluent areas because landlords will not take them. Research has already demonstrated that laws prohibiting source of income discrimination improve voucher utilization rates, and increase exposure to diversity.¹⁰ The HOME Act can help remove these barriers to residential opportunity, and provide thousands of poor families in the Maryland region with the chance to improve their children's futures.

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