

**Testimony Submitted to the Committee on
Housing & Community Development**

**By D.C. Long-Term Care Ombudsman
For the District of Columbia**

**Performance Oversight Hearing: Department of Housing and
Community Development**

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Good morning Chairwoman Bonds and Members of the Committee on Housing and Community Development. I am Lynne Person, the DC Long-Term Care Ombudsman with Legal Counsel for the Elderly and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of the approximately 6,000 District residents receiving long-term services and supports (LTSS) in nursing homes, assisted living residences, community residence facilities and in their private homes through the Elderly and Persons with Physical Disabilities (EPD) Waiver.

The D.C. Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (Ombudsman Program) is a part of the D.C. Office on Aging Senior Service Network and is charged by federal and D.C. law with representing the interests of some of the District's most vulnerable citizens. Throughout the years, the Ombudsman Program has strongly supported District residents receiving person-centered care in the least restrictive environment. Through our advocacy, we have learned that many of our residents are forced into a nursing home or forced to remain in a nursing home because their home has not been adapted to meet their changing needs. In many cases, the changes needed are not extensive or expensive such as a ramp or grab bars, but these modifications must be made in a timely and affordable manner in order to prevent permanent institutionalization.

In D.C., there are programs established to provide home modifications for residents. For example, the Department of Housing and Community Development ("DHCD") currently administers home modification assistance programs, including the Single Family Residential Rehabilitation Program ("SFFRP"), the Home Accessibility Improvement Program ("HAIP") (which is jointly administered with applications for SFFRP), and the Senior Citizens Home Repair and Improvement Program.¹

HAIP provides grants of up to \$30,000 to low-income District residents specifically for "improvements needed to remove physical barriers in the home."² The grants available under the District's program are quite generous. However, the process is

¹ See 14 DCMR §§2800-2899 ("Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program"); 42 D.C. Code §§ 2201-2207 and 14 DCMR §§3000-3099 ("Senior Citizens' Home Repair and Improvement Program.').

² Single Family Residential Rehabilitation Program (SFFRP) Fact Sheet, *available at* <http://dhcd.dc.gov/service/single-family-residential-rehabilitation-program-sffrp>.

lengthy, and seniors in need of immediate repairs to prevent falls may sometimes wait months or even years before obtaining home modifications. Some seniors are discouraged from applying by the lengthy application form, documentation requirements pertaining to loans but not grants, and extensive waiting time.

The Ombudsman program has had numerous clients living in nursing facilities who have encountered difficulties in returning to the community due to the need for home modifications. The Ombudsman program has also had numerous clients who have been at risk for nursing facility placement caused by the lack of readily accessible home adaptations.

In December 2013, the Ombudsman program began meeting with representatives at DHCD to address the need for a streamlined and swift process to enable seniors to obtain home modifications to return to the community from nursing facilities and to remain in the community. We appreciate the willingness of DHCD to meet with us. We have been working with DHCD on modification of the SFRRP application, and we see great progress in the draft application. We look forward to implementation of the new application, which will greatly reduce burdens on applicants.

In our meetings, we have identified the problem of individuals being unable to readily access home modifications to age in place. We recommend enactment of new, streamlined procedures to facilitate the provision of grants – in amounts up to \$10,000 – to finance modestly-priced, but nonetheless essential, accessibility modifications such as ramps, grab bars and barrier-free doors and door handles. Streamlining the process for small-dollar grants will make it easier for D.C. residents with disabilities to remain in their homes and communities. The cost will be well below the price tag for nursing home care, which is close to \$9,000 per month in the District.³

It would be possible to achieve this result through legislation establishing a separate grant-only program with specific timeframes and deadlines. The program could

³ See Genworth 2014 Cost of Care Survey, District Of Columbia - State Median: Annual Care Costs in 2014, semi-private room annual cost of \$107,128, available at <https://www.genworth.com/corporate/about-genworth/industry-expertise/cost-of-care.html>.

utilize the services of an occupational therapist to identify needed adaptations and minimize the likelihood of fraud.

A small-dollar home modification grant program to prevent falls, unnecessary hospitalizations and institutionalization would facilitate achievement of the Age-Friendly DC Strategic Plan goals of (1) improving access to home modification programs prior to mobility limitations; (2) streamlining the process for residents in urgent need to apply, and (3) including an occupational therapy home assessment in all home modifications for accessibility purposes.

Establishment of the new program would not require the appropriation of new funds, or the creation of a new agency. The proposed small-dollar grants may be drawn from the same fund, and be administered by the same District personnel, already in place for HAIP.

Other State Programs for Emergency or Streamlined Small Dollar Home Modifications

Delaware, Florida, New York and Virginia offer emergency or streamlined small dollar home modification funds. The County of Newcastle in Delaware administers two such programs. The “Senior Minor Home Repair Program” provides grants of \$500 to \$2,500 to low-income seniors for “minor repairs” focusing on “health, safety and security conditions.”⁴ In addition, the “Emergency Home Repair Program” provides no interest loans of \$500 to \$5,000 to low-income homeowners (not just senior homeowners) to repair “dangerous” conditions.

The general housing rehabilitation program in Sarasota City, Florida includes an “emergency loan” program providing no-interest loans of up to \$20,000 (over 15 years) to low-income homeowners for emergency repairs.⁵

⁴ See “Minor Home Repair Program,” available at <http://www.nccde.org/468/Minor-Home-Repair-Program>, and “Emergency Home Repair Program,” available at <http://www.nccde.org/466/AARP-Programs-Services>.

⁵ See City of Sarasota, “Policy Guidelines for Owner-Occupied Rehabilitation Program,” available at <http://sarasotagov->

Both Virginia and New York administer statewide programs. Virginia's "Emergency Home and Accessibility Repair Program" ("EHARP") provides grants of up to \$4,000 to low-income homeowners.⁶ The grants are available for urgently-needed health and safety improvements, and for physical accessibility modifications. Larger grants up to \$7,500 may be provided in extenuating circumstances.

New York State's "Residential Emergency Services to Offer Home Repair" ("RESTORE") program provides grants to eligible municipalities and not-for-profit organizations, which in turn distribute the funds to senior homeowners. The funds are provided to individuals in the form of grants, loans or both, in amounts up to \$5,000, for emergency repairs and physical accessibility modifications.⁷

Conclusion

We recommend that the District of Columbia consider legislation facilitating the provision of small-dollar grants under its existing Home Accessibility Improvements Program. This will make it easier for seniors and people with disabilities to age in place with dignity and remain in the community, fulfilling the strategic goals of Age-Friendly DC. Thank you for letting me submit this testimony on behalf of the DC Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program and the residents of the District of Columbia.

com.gowest1.gowesthosting.com/PDF/OHCD/Owner%20Occupied%20Rehabilitation%20-%20BCC%20Approved%207-9-12.pdf

⁶ Details of "EHARP" are found at <http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/index.php/housing-programs-and-assistance/71-emergency-home-and-accessibility-repair-program-eharp.html>.

⁷ Details of the "RESTORE" program are found at <http://www.nyshcr.org/Programs/RESTORE/>. On visiting this webpage on January 22, 2014, we observed that funds are currently not available for new applicants.