



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of
Health and Social Services

GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITIES
& SPECIAL EDUCATION
Patrick Reinhart, Executive Director

3601 C Street, Suite 740
Anchorage, Alaska 99503-5924
Main: 907.269.8990
Toll Free: 1.888.269.8990
Fax: 907.269.8995

April 7, 2015

Oscar Cedano
HCD Coordinator
Alaska Housing Finance Corporation
P.O. Box 101020
Anchorage, AK 99510-1020

Dear Mr. Cedano,

The Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education is proud to be a partner agency with AHFC on the creation of your Consolidated Housing and Community Development (HCD) Plan. On behalf of the Council, I am pleased to provide you with relevant comments for the SYF 2016-2020 HCD Plan.

We appreciate your use of our housing research and priorities from the Council's 5-Year State Plan to strengthen your arguments on the unmet housing needs of Alaskans with disabilities (pg. 46). However, the Council recommends a few grammatical and editorial changes to the plan. Wherever the Council is mentioned, please update those line items to include our full name, so it reads "Alaska Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education" (pages 10, 13, 16, 22). Also, page 60 seems to be missing the rationale for how the public services jurisdiction's needs were determined, as there is a heading to this effect with no supporting text.

We would like to see the consistent use of person-first language throughout the plan, so that phrases like "the disabled" or "disabled person" are replaced with "person with a disability." This is commonly accepted language that allows people to come first, so they are not defined by their disabilities. Changes to this effect should be made on pages 6, 22, 33, 35, 39, 41, 43, 46, and wherever possible in future plans and publications. Similarly, on page 48 we suggest a

change in language from “people with mental or addictive *diseases*” to “disabilities” and that housing providers fail to recognize their behaviors as connected to their “disabilities.” The reason for this wording change is that people with disabilities rarely refer to their diverse range of abilities as diseases. Using disability language also reminds housing providers that these conditions are legitimate disabilities, which qualifies these individuals as a protected class under Fair Housing laws.

We applaud AHFC’s stated goal to expand the supply of affordable housing for Alaskans with special needs, incorporating universal design and appropriate supportive services (pgs. 7 and 85). The existing housing supply in Alaska is inadequate to meet current needs for people with disabilities, and projections indicate an increased need for such housing in the coming years. Federal changes to the Medicaid Home and Community-Based Waiver system now require people with intellectual and developmental disabilities receiving waivers to live in fully integrated settings in the community. More people with disabilities are now exploring independent housing options than ever before, making this goal a pressing concern. Additionally, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are aging, resulting in increasing rates of physical disabilities and dementia, creating a “double burden” of disabilities that will require even more specialized housing needs.

We very much support the work done to include AK901 vouchers for recipients with disabilities. However, there appears to be a slight disparity in vouchers utilized by ethnic minorities experiencing disabilities. Data on pages 37-38 indicate only 5 African-American, 3 American Indian/Alaska Native, 1 Hispanic, and 2 “other race” families with disabilities are currently receiving vouchers (serving no Asians or Pacific Islanders). Targeted advertising of voucher opportunities for these minority groups could help serve these vulnerable populations with appropriate housing options.

One question we have is regarding funding for the Beneficiary and Special Needs Housing program. Pages 94 and 118 depict \$0 in anticipated federal, state, and total funding for this program. However, it is later stated that AHFC combines state Special Needs Housing Grant funds with HOME funds to pay for projects providing supportive housing to people with mental

health issues (pgs. 95, 119). How will AHFC be able to provide this program with no anticipated federal or state resources to do so?

One potential collaborator that appears to be missing from the plan is the Division of Senior and Disability Services' Nursing Facility Transition Fund. We encourage future work with this program, and believe this service is important enough to mention in your 5-year HCD plan. Directly from SDS's website:

The funds from the Nursing Facility Transition Program can be used to help an elderly person or individual with a disability transition from a nursing facility back into the community. We can provide one-time funds for:

1. *Home or environmental modifications;*
2. *Travel/room/board to bring caregivers in from a rural community to receive training;*
3. *Trial trips to home or an assisted living home;*
4. *Payment for an appropriate worker for skill level needed;*
5. *Security deposits;*
6. *One-time initial cleaning of home;*
7. *Basic furnishings necessary to set up a livable home;*
8. *Transportation to the new home.*
9. *Other needed items or services may be approved by Program Coordinators.*

Lastly, we have done some collaborative research with Stone Soup Group on housing barriers in Anchorage. We have conducted focus groups, individual interviews, and an electronic survey that will be published shortly. Our work revealed that the biggest challenges to housing for transition-age youth are in the initial decision-making process, followed by difficulties finding supported housing environments. Our youth participants have told us that convincing their parents or guardians to let them look for independent housing is the first challenge, as many caregivers are worried that the youth will not thrive on their own. Many individuals with disabilities may be stymied at this first step, unsupported by family members to move out of their home environments. After that decision-making process to seek independent housing is made, however, youth are struggling to find supportive housing that is the "right fit" for their needs.

Individuals with significant disabilities may need assisted living environments while others may do well with more independence, in a supported housing situation. However, transition-age youth and adults in Anchorage seem to have a lot of difficulty finding such housing arrangements. They report a lack of housing information or a central agency to go to for help, as even their care coordinators and direct service providers are usually unable to find the right housing. One mother had looked for over a year to find an assisted living home for her 26 year old son with Down Syndrome, only to bring him back home several months later because the housing environment did not provide adequate support. If AHFC can assist in making supported housing information and programs more readily available to the general public, this could alleviate some of the problems we have found in our research.

We hope our comments are helpful and thank you for the work AHFC does to support the housing needs of Alaskans with disabilities. We look forward to strengthening our collaborative relationship over these next five years.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Britteny Howell". The signature is cursive and somewhat stylized, with the first name being more prominent.

Britteny M. Howell, M.A., ABD
Research Analyst III
Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education