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Testimony before the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

“Laying the Foundation: Housing Accessibility and Affordability for Older Adults and People with Disabilities”

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Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Braun, and Members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, thank you for inviting me here today to share my story. My name is Domonique Howell. I am a disability advocate from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I am an independent living specialist at Liberty Resources Inc, a center for independent living in southeastern Pennsylvania. Today, I am here to speak about the importance of affordable accessible housing in Philadelphia and nationwide. With a population of 12.90 million residents as of 2021 in Pennsylvania, disabled residents make up at least 25 percent of the population which equates to 2,677,350 residents. I feel that it is imperative to focus on the needs of the disability community while also understanding that this is not just a regional issue but a national one.

Many of you may have realized the supply for affordable accessible housing in Pennsylvania and nationwide does not meet the demand of disabled residents in need. For decades, there has been an affordable housing shortage which has continually led to chronic housing insecurities. This includes homelessness and evictions because many residents cannot afford the rising rent cost especially on fixed incomes. For example, last year, the independent living services department of Liberty Resources Inc received an average of 100 calls per month from disabled people needing housing. This is especially true for Philadelphians, including myself.

Five years ago, my family and I which included my then 3-year-old daughter, and my aging grandmother were wrongfully evicted due to a decision made by the owners of the property. They no longer wanted to make repairs to my inaccessible apartment which was required by the Philadelphia Housing Authority to continue to receive payments. The owners made the decision that they would no longer accept the subsidy which led to our eviction because we could not afford market rate rent on our own. With the help of some advocacy, my grandmother was able to be housed once we were evicted. Unfortunately, my daughter and I weren't as lucky and were denied entry into the Office of Homeless Services twice because I am a recipient of home and community-based services and receive attendant care hours. I receive home and community-based services so that I can remain living independently in the community. The Office of Homeless Services' intake staff stated that my attendant could not enter the shelter with us because of the services I receive. After getting legal representation and constant advocating, I was able to enter the shelter but not without lack of accessibility. For a year, I slept in my power wheelchair even while in the shelter.

After fighting, advocating, and sharing my personal story, my daughter and I now have a place we can call home. Even though my daughter and I now have a place to call home, it does not come without its accessibility challenges. Unfortunately, even though the building we live in has other tenants with disabilities, the elevator is constantly broken which leaves many residents including myself trapped in our homes - sometimes for weeks on end. My entire life I have had to make the decision between accessibility and affordability as so many other Americans with disabilities do daily. As an example, for the first time in my life I now have a bathroom that is accessible enough for my wheelchair to enter and be able to close the door.

As an advocate and activist, personally and professionally one of my primary focuses is housing justice because housing is a human right and unfortunately far too many Americans, especially people with disabilities, are not being equally granted the right of housing they can afford that is accessible. It is my opinion that Pennsylvania and other states across the country should decrease their focus on market value development and increase their efforts to develop affordable accessible housing to match the needs of residents. It is my hope that as the members of the Senate you decide to take a stance and work diligently to help grant people with disabilities across the United States with their right of affordable accessible housing. Thank you for your time and I look forward to answering any questions you may have for me.