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**Government of the District of Columbia**



**Office of the Tenant Advocate**

Testimony of

**Johanna Shreve**  
Chief Tenant Advocate

**PROPOSED FISCAL YEAR 2020  
BUDGET HEARING**

Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization  
The Honorable Anita Bonds, Chairperson  
Council of the District of Columbia

Thursday, March 28, 2019  
10:00 a.m.

Room 120  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

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Good morning, Chairperson Bonds and members of the Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization. I am Johanna Shreve, the Chief Tenant Advocate of the District of Columbia in the Office of the Tenant Advocate. I am here today to present testimony regarding the Mayor's Fiscal Year 2020 proposed operating budget for the agency. I wish to thank the Mayor, this Committee, the Council, and the community for supporting the work of this agency.

**The FY 2020 budget proposal**

The total FY 2020 proposed operating budget for the agency is \$4,183,698. Local Funds account for \$3,524,000 of that total, and Special Purpose Revenue Funds account for the remaining \$660,000. The total represents a net reduction of \$70,667, or just under 1.7 percent, from the approved FY 2019 budget. The change in the agency's funding level reflects an increase in funding for personal services, which is offset by a slightly larger decrease in funding for non-personal services.

The 11.4 percent increase in funding for personal services is to support two additional FTEs – one for the Legal Branch and one for the Education and Outreach Branch. The 19.9 percent decrease in non-personal services funding is primarily due to two factors. First, \$175,000

has been removed from the Legal Service Provider fund which I will discuss later in my testimony. Second, most of the funding for the Rent Control Clearinghouse Database demonstration project has been removed. As I will discuss in more detail later in my testimony, the agency expects to complete the database project and transfer it to DHCD's Rental Accommodations Division shortly after the end of the current fiscal year. The agency also believes the Mayor's proposed budget includes sufficient funding (\$320,735) for any database costs it may incur after the start of FY 2020.

I will now discuss the changes in this year's budget in terms of each of the agency's programmatic divisions. I will do so with reference to the "OTA FY 2019 Approved – FY 2020 Proposed NPS Budget" spreadsheet, copies of which we have provided to the Committee. Our programmatic areas include: (1) Administrative Services; (2) Legal Representation; (3) Case Management Administration and Community Outreach; (4) Policy Advocacy; (5) the Emergency Housing Assistance Program (EHAP); and (6) the Tenant Education Institute.

### Legal Service Provider fund

I will now discuss an important agency activity that I believe warrants further funding consideration -- the Legal Service Provider Fund. This program has existed virtually from the moment the OTA first opened its doors in 2006. Ever since then, the program has helped to promote the agency's mission to provide as many tenants in the District as possible with needed legal services.

As I explained to the Committee in my responses this past January to pre-hearing oversight questions, the OTA Legal Service Provider Program started when OTA had no litigating attorneys, but was given authority to distribute \$400,000 to the legal service community for the representation of tenants in public interest cases. Over time, the program's budget was reduced as funding increases allowed the agency to hire more in-house litigating attorneys. For FY2019, the OTA was given the authority to add three additional litigating attorneys, and the approved budget for the Legal Service Provider Program was reduced to \$175,000.

Having administered the Legal Service Provider program for a decade, I determined as of the start of the current fiscal year that it was time to step back and assess the effectiveness and purposes of the

program. I am well aware of the value of public-private partnerships in providing services to DC tenants. I continue to believe that a meaningful Legal Services Provider Program would be a benefit to the District's tenant community.

In particular, we need to restore, and indeed increase, funding for cases involving our most vulnerable residents -- elderly tenants, tenants with disabilities, and tenants who can afford to live in the District only with the help of housing subsidies. Another goal is to broaden and deepen the agency's community partnerships by further engaging (a) the non-legal community based organizations; and (b) especially university housing law clinics, so that more law students are exposed to this critical public interest area of the law.

**Rent Control Clearinghouse Database**

I will now provide an update as to the status of the Rent Control Clearinghouse Database. As you are aware, the OTA has been charged by statute to (a) complete a demonstration project to establish a user-friendly, internet-accessible, and searchable database for the submission, management, and review of housing provider submissions to DHCD's Rental Accommodations Division; and (b) integrate into the database an

online portal for the filing of registration statements and claims of exemption under the Rental Housing Act of 1985.<sup>1</sup>

As we previously apprised the Committee, circumstances beyond the agency's control have delayed the vendor selection process, thus preventing us from spending FY 2019 appropriations to date. I am informed that publication of the Request for Proposal is imminent, which will start the vendor selection process. Once the vendor is selected, as I noted earlier in my testimony, we anticipate that the actual FY 2019 and the proposed FY 2020 appropriations will suffice to complete the project. We expect to do so, and to transfer the project to DHCD's Rental Accommodations Division, by the December 13, 2019, statutory deadline.

### **Conclusion**

In closing I wish to thank you, Chairperson Bonds, for spearheading emergency and temporary legislation earlier this year to align the statutory deadlines for the database and the re-registration projects.<sup>2</sup> I also wish to thank you, and the members of the Committee, for your dedication and

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<sup>1</sup> (a) Law 22-0033, the "Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Support Act of 2017," Subtitle J; (b) Law 22-0997, the "Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Support Act of 2018," Subtitle CC, as amended.

<sup>2</sup> Act 23-0004, the "Rental Housing Registration Extension Emergency Amendment Act of 2019," effective from February 6, 2019, to May 7, 2019; Act 23-0008, the Rental Housing Registration Extension Temporary Amendment Act of 2019," projected law date May 2, 2019.

commitment to the tenant community, especially our most vulnerable renters. This concludes my testimony and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

