

March 7, 2023

Dear Chairman White and Councilmembers,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify for the oversight hearing for the DC Housing Authority. My name is Jamoni Overby, and I am the District of Columbia Conservation Advocate for Nature Forward (formerly known as Audubon Naturalist Society), which has been helping residents of the DMV enjoy, learn about, and protect nature for 125 years. Our Conservation priorities are human health & access to nature; biodiversity & habitat; fighting the climate crisis; and sustainable land use. The urgency of the climate crisis is evident across our country today, and that urgency underscores the importance of hearings like this one.

We recognize that the DC Housing Authority (DCHA) has significant, structural issues that have seriously impacted its ability to provide safe, dignified housing for its residents, as well as to expand access to residents who have been waiting (sometimes for decades) for access to affordable housing. The Council must ensure that these issues are fixed urgently, not kicked down the road into the future. But just because the agency has been failing at its most basic mission does not mean it shouldn't also look forward, to ways it can proactively improve quality of life for residents and play an integral part to helping the District achieve all its social, economic, and environmental goals. Nature Forward believes that the best thing the DC Housing Authority can do for the residents and the environment is to transition from fossil fuels to all electric energy. This should include all future renovations and all new buildings under their authority.

Nature Forward has testified to the Council in the past on the importance of transitioning to electric appliances and heating and cooling. The DC Housing Authority is in a key position to lead the way in that transition, which will help the District meet its goals outlined in Law 24-176, the Climate Commitment Amendment Act of 2022. This law requires the District to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by no less than 60% relative to 2006 levels by 2030 and to reach carbon neutrality by 2045, requires the District to achieve certain interim targets for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions between 2025 and 2045, and requires the District government to reach carbon neutrality for emissions associated with government operations by 2040.

Additionally, the continued use of gas appliances and heating and cooling in public housing has a negative effect on the health of residents in those units. Burning methane gas emits pollutants linked to heightened respiratory symptoms, asthma attacks, and hospital admissions. Children living in households with gas appliances are 42% more likely to have asthma. Burning methane gas releases carbon dioxide and contributes to climate change.





Recent research has shown that gas appliances leak methane even when turned off, and that the gas industry has known this for decades and worked to cover up the evidence. When methane leaks directly into the atmosphere from pipeline leaks, it is more than 80 times more powerful as a global warming agent than carbon dioxide.

The District should provide additional funds for the transition of public housing units from gas to electric, so DCHA has the tools it needs. In addition, DCHA should provide assistance for those landlords who house voucher residents. To meet our Climate Commitments, DC cannot just vaguely state we will reach these goals but should instead have a clear roadmap and timeline for agencies and leadership to collaborate for success.

As Mayor Bowser moves forward on her goal to bring 55,000 new residents to the District, DCHA will play a key role. This will require that social justice issues are addressed. The recent HUD review of the state of public housing in the District outlined many alarming issues that it is incumbent upon the Council to address, urgently, to attend to residents' basic needs for safe habitation. However, Nature Forward believes that in addition to safe housing (including indoor air quality), every citizen should ALSO have access to green space and natural areas close to their housing. Trees and green space not only help lower the ambient temperatures and reduce the urban heat island effect, but it gives residents a community centric place to reduce their stress. Green space also creates communities that support safe and easy places for people to walk, bike, roll their wheelchair, or other physical activities. All people, including public housing and voucher-served residents, deserve housing that is safe, accessible, and healthy, and lets them proudly contribute to doing their part to fight the climate crisis.

As the DC Housing Authority looks to upgrade current units or build new units, they need to transition from gas to electric energy supplies and consider the importance of the outside areas as well as the inside of the buildings.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Jamoni Overby

Nature Forward, DC Conservation Advocate

