From: David Rivera-Kohr
To: City County Homeless Issues Committee
Cc: Dane County Homeless Justice Initiative; Madison Tenant Power
Subject: Public Comment on Budget Recommendation
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To the City-County Homeless Issues Committee,

The homelessness crisis in Madison and Dane County is arguably the worst it has ever been. In Dane County, there are 2,000 homeless students, more than 1,000 people visit homeless shelters every month, and all indications point to a rapid surge in homelessness over the last few years. People are suffering and dying in our streets. The effects of homelessness radiate into our communities, jeopardizing the health and safety of all Dane County residents. It is time to treat this crisis with the urgency it demands. In 2012, the County Board recognized housing as a human right. It's time for the local government to put its money where its mouth is.

There is a mountain of evidence that Housing First—public housing with robust wraparound services—is the most effective solution to reverse homelessness. Public housing provides a crucial safety net to the people who don't qualify for—or simply can't afford—the city/county's affordable housing. Temporary shelters, which the city and county spend millions on every year, are band-aid solutions that, while providing some relief, do little to disrupt the cycle of homelessness, especially while these shelters suffer from staffing and service shortages. Madison's attempts at Housing First at Rethke Terrace and Tree Lane suffered from negligent management, inadequate staffing/service provision, and poor strategy. The city and county must take the reins by establishing a coordinated team of residential property managers and service providers to deliver high quality public housing.

Although budgetary constraints may be a concern, millions of dollars can be found to fund a new jail or a new homeless shelter when the political will is present. This moment in history demands the political will for public housing. Mayor Rhodes-Conway proposed cutting $6 million in services if the $22 million property tax referendum didn’t pass; perhaps this $6 million is better spent on public housing. Although police budget cuts would reduce shared revenue from the state, 13% of the Dane County jail annual bookings are for people presumed to be experiencing homelessness, meaning public housing can offset major costs to the police and free up money that may have otherwise been spent raising the police budget. The new overnight homeless shelter alone will have an annual cost of $3 million, and the county already spends $3 million per year on Porchlight and Salvation Army. Public housing would significantly offset the expenditures on these temporary shelters. The city spends $20 million a year on housing vouchers which line the pockets of the same landlords driving Madison's rents through the roof. Not only would public housing offset housing voucher costs, but it would show how local politicians are finally taking a strong political stance to counter the state Republicans' bans on rent control and inclusionary zoning. Between the millions of dollars outlined above, the costs of health services, legal proceedings, and many other preventable costs caused by homelessness, we can absolutely afford high quality public housing. If saving lives and standing up to Republicans is not motivation enough, a stabilized homeless population would bolster economic activity and provide ample return on investment from

public housing.

The local government has been dragging its feet on the homelessness crisis for far too long. We have little to show for years of making reports and plans about the housing crisis. Market-based solutions are sorely insufficient as proven by the local government's repeated attempts. We need to take bold and immediate action. We need to invest in public housing now.

Sincerely,
David Rivera-Kohr
Organizer for Madison Tenant Power and Dane County Homeless Justice Initiative