

**Pennsylvania State Senate**  
**Urban Affairs and Housing Committee Presentation**  
**September 26, 2019**

Good morning Senators. My name is Jim Hudack. I am the executive Director for the Blair County Department of Social Services. It is my honor and pleasure to present testimony regarding Blight in Blair County to the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee. The Department of Social Services is responsible for a variety of programs including the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), Human Services Development Fund (HSDF), Homeless Assistance Program (HAP), Act 152, Demolition Fund and Act 137 Affordable Housing Trust Fund. As reflected, the Department of Social Services does quite a bit in attempting to meet the needs of housing for the residents of Blair County including addressing the issue of Blight.

In order to frame the issue of blight in Blair County, I will first reflect some brief demographic information of the population of the County. Blair County has a population of approximately 123,000 residents. The fastest growing segment of the population is older adults. Almost 20% of the population is over the age of 65. The county's poverty rate is at 16% with another 23% barely above the federal poverty level who make less than the bare minimum that is needed to live on for this county. When looking at those over 65 years of age, those in poverty and barely above poverty totals 41% of this age group.

The medium income for Blair County is \$45,957 which is \$13,000 below the medium income for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The average price of a home in Blair County is \$117,000 as compared to Pennsylvania which is \$174,000 and the United States is at \$219,000.

The housing stock in Blair County has changed over the past 10 years. We have seen a decrease in home ownership to 71%, as well as, an increase of renter occupied units of 2,836 from 2010 to 2017. Also during this period of time, we have realized a decrease of 226 available housing units in the County. These housing units, for the most part, were ones that would have been available for low to moderate income individuals and families.

The challenges Blair County experiences regarding blight is based on a number of factors. One of which includes an older housing stock. 50% of the houses in Blair County were constructed prior to 1960 and over 31% were constructed prior to 1939. There are a number of housing units across the county that can no longer be adequately maintained by their owner due to the owner's age and their level of income. There has been a significant shift from home ownership to rental properties. Many of the rental properties are owned by individuals who do not reside in the county or even in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As a result, their level of general maintenance and repair is not completed in a timely fashion if at all.

The blight issues we face to properties are those of overgrowth of vegetation; the lack of proper maintenance and repairs; and garbage and litter in the streets. Also, a lack of community pride to maintain the community one lives in is a factor. These are issues that do not have just one single

solution. They require the combined efforts of the entire community to step up to meet the challenges of creating a healthier environment for all of us to live in. Funding to address these issues needs to be a combined public/private partnership that attacks the core issues and also builds a level of sustainability for the future. Experience tells us any enhancements to the community goes a long way to increasing property values; ownerships; and a greater sense of community for everyone.

Through the efforts of both the Blair County and municipal elected officials, actions are under way to take on the challenges of blight in our community. On May 30, 2017, Blair County Commissioners approved Resolution 223-2017 creating a Demolition Fund Program based on Act 152 of 2016. This program allows municipalities and housing authorities to apply for funding for the demolition of structures that meet at least 3 of the 9 criteria listed under Section 5(d)(5) of the Act of November 26, 2005 known as the Abandon and Blighted Property Conservatorship Act. Some of the criteria includes buildings unfit for human habitation, the increased risk of fire and dilapidated appearance of the building which negatively affects the economic well-being of the community to name a few. Funds for this program are generated by charging a \$7.50 fee for each deed and mortgage recorded effective September 1, 2017. Since this time, we have collected \$90,461.15 towards the Demolition Fund. We have also, completed 4 projects with 2 being in the City of Altoona and 2 in the Roaring Spring Borough. Currently, we have 2 additional projects that have yet to be completed in Roaring Spring. Once all of the projects are completed, the total costs for the 6 projects will be \$75,594.00. Due to the ability to leverage \$25,001 in matching funds, the cost from the Demolition Fund will only be \$47,593.00. As with any program, we are going through our growing trials and tribulations. Our intent is to continue to grow this program and encourage other municipalities to submit projects that will address blight issues in their community.

We are also using our Act 137 Affordable Housing Trust Fund to address blight issues in our community. The Deferred Weatherization Program allows up to \$5,000 to be used towards the repairs to a residence that has been deferred from weatherization due to a failed inspection. Once the necessary repairs are completed to the residence, weatherization funds can be applied for improvements. This current program allows us to leverage two dollars for every dollar we invest into the structure.

The First Time Home Buyers Program under the Affordable Housing Trust Fund was created as an opportunity for individuals to receive a \$3,000 gift that can be applied towards the purchase of their first home. The individual or family must meet the income criteria and complete a program through the Blair County Community Action agency. Once the individual has completed the process, they receive a letter of commitment for the \$3,000 gift.

Finally, we have blended funding with the Pennsylvania Department of Health Lead Abatement program. This program has identified 5 homes with lead hazards in which children reside that are under the age of 6. The program will remove the lead contaminants from the home and also make necessary repairs and improvements to the structure. These residences can either be owner occupied or rental properties. Currently, we have an application submitted to the Department of Health for future funding to add an additional 30 homes to this program.

During the past few years, the Blair County Community Development Block Grant has been committing much of the yearly allocation for housing rehabilitation of residential properties. This includes using funding from both the entitlement and non-entitlement allocations. The 2017 allocation had \$400,000 committed to housing rehabilitation. The 2018 allocation increased this amount to \$520,000 to housing rehabilitation. This year's 2019 allocation has increased to \$631,000 for housing rehabilitation. This amount represents 87% of the total allocation.

Blair County has also applied and received a HOME Investment Partnership Program Grant (HOME) through the Pennsylvania Department of Community Development in the amount of \$250,000 to be used towards housing rehabilitation and improvements. This grant was awarded to Blair County in the past 2 weeks.

Another small community based program that is worthy of mentioning is the TEAMeffort program. I recently became aware of this program through one of my Advisory Board members. This is a non-profit, inter-denominational program that has been operating for over 20 years. The program brings adolescents from all over the country for a one week camp 8 times a year to Blue Knob. During the week at camp, one of their activities for 2 and half days is to provide community service to those in need. These projects include painting, home repair, roofing and building wheelchair ramps for those in the Blair County community. All costs for any work done by TEAMeffort is either donated or paid for as part of the student's registration fee. This is a wonderful example of members of the community coming together to assist in the improvement of the community.

The County of Blair is committed to continuing to address the issues of blight. We will continue to explore other options and program opportunities. Some of the options we have begun to explore is expansion of the HOME program, a side lot program for properties in the county repository, and partnering with TEAMeffort next year with some possible funding from the Affordable Housing Trust Fund to increase the number of homes they can assist. Blair County was recently selected to be part of the National Association of County (NACo) Rural Impact County Challenge on housing. During the course of the next year, we will be working with NACo and other counties across the United States on dealing with issues concerning housing. One aspect of this program will also be addressing blight and its impact in rural counties.

In closing, the issues of blight in the Blair County community are ones we can no longer ignore. These are issues that affect all aspects of our community from housing to economic development to healthier communities. These challenges we face must be addressed by all members of the community. The old saying to move a mountain, one must do it one stone at a time really applies in this situation. The efforts of all community members no matter how large or small can have a positive effect on the improvement of our community for today and in the future.

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts and concerns regarding blight in Blair County. I would be happy to entertain any questions you may have regarding my testimony.