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To Subcommittee Chairwoman Bonamici and Ranking Member Fulcher and the rest of the Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to present this testimony on behalf of Action for Boston Community Development, Inc. (ABCD) and our sister Community Action Agencies across the country. In addition, thank you to Chairwoman Bonamici and Representative Thompson for introducing H.R. 5129, the Community Services Block Grant Modernization Act of 2021.

A NATIONAL NETWORK OF NEIGHBORS

The national network of Community Action Agencies, which reaches nearly every community in the United States, is a quiet but highly effective tool through which local residents work together to provide increased opportunity for their low-income neighbors.

Currently ABCD, is the largest private, non-profit Community Action Agency in New England. We assist over 100,000 low-income residents in the Greater Boston area each year—helping them to move from poverty to stability, and from stability to success.

The Community Services Block Grant, CSBG, is at the core of this success. Its provisions ensure local leadership, and a clear focus on economic opportunity. Its flexible structure promotes innovation and leveraging of other resources—both public and private—allowing each community to develop unique solutions to fit local needs. Finally, it ensures a high level of accountability for each Community Action Agency through outcomes-based performance management. The basic structure of CSBG has shaped the growth of ABCD for over almost 60 years.

AN EFFECTIVE TOOL TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY: ABCD’S EXPERIENCE

- Today, the Community Services Block Grant is the backbone of the agency, supporting critical services for low-income households across Greater Boston. This Community Services designation allows us to offer, through one door, a comprehensive set of integrated tools to respond to the complex needs of families and communities.
- **CSBG funding provides support for 12 Neighborhood Service Centers and for a core of community-based staff and programs.** These are the resources “on the ground” in each neighborhood in Boston and three other cities—providing an open door to

families in crisis, a comprehensive approach to the issues of poverty, and access to all of the agency's resources.

For example, Neighborhood Service Centers operate food pantries; assist clients with applying for SNAP (food stamps) and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP); help green card holders apply for citizenship; facilitate workshops on computer literacy and child injury prevention; provide children's clothing; and much more. The scope of these services is substantial. ABCD also delivers the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program that helped 5000 low income taxpayers file for a refund and returned over ten million dollars to low-income communities last year.

- **CSBG funding also supports ABCD's workforce development programs.** These programs give adults the education need for high demand industries, the child care voucher management that allow more than 6000 families to work, and the youth programming that employs close to 1000 teens in their first job each year teaching skills that are needed for life long employment. The vast majority of resources provided by ABCD are strengthened directly or indirectly by CSBG.
- **CSBG continuously works with the faith based community to engage in the solutions and fight against poverty.** For example, a local ministerial alliance has been a longstanding governing Board Member and partner in community outreach and in development of employment and violence prevention programs for young men. Looking forward, ABCD also expects to leverage CSBG in support of incoming evacuees from Afghanistan, working with local refugee resettlement agencies and faith-based organizations.

FLEXIBILITY TO RESPOND IN CRISIS

CSBG funding, including resources made available through the CARES Act, made it possible for ABCD to respond quickly and effectively to the COVID-19 crisis.

- **ABCD rapidly built a network of more than 20 partnering community agencies.** These included grassroots organizations, faith-based groups, and municipalities; they coordinated food distribution, rental assistance, and specialized services for elders, teens, and homeless individuals.
- **CSBG resources transformed education and workforce initiatives to remote operation.** Over 200 English language learners were able to continue their English classes online with the purchase of laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots. Youth and elders completed vocational education courses online.
- **CSBG helped ABCD distribute over 3 million pounds of emergency food.** During the pandemic, ABCD created new public-private partnerships with food suppliers, restaurants and municipalities to meet overwhelming needs in new ways. As food pantries saw a 300% increase in demand between March 2020 and September 2021,

ABCD worked with its partners to establish new food pantries, increase the amount of fresh produce distributed, and support access to culturally appropriate foods for minority populations.

- **CSBG helped ABCD intervene to prevent homelessness for hundreds of households.** ABCD’s housing department has for years provided counseling and stabilization services to Greater Boston. The department assists with applications for rental vouchers, subsidized housing, rental assistance funding, emergency shelter, and with mediation in tenant-landlord disputes. While the state waited for the current infrastructure to put systems in place, get back to offices and hire people, ABCD was already able to distribute at least one month’s rent to fill that gap. It especially helped small landlords who needed that rent to help pay their mortgage. Additionally, ABCD’s foreclosure prevention program ensures that homeowners have access to financial literacy and budget counseling, can obtain state and local property tax abatements, and receive support in negotiations with mortgage lenders. During the pandemic, CARES CSBG provided ABCD with the capacity to provide direct rental and mortgage assistance. In partnership with three Greater Boston municipalities, ABCD leveraged nearly \$3.8 million to keep tenants and homeowners current on their rent and mortgages.
- **ABCD used CARES CSBG funding to put people back to work who had been laid off because of the pandemic,** hiring 18 temporary part-time staff to bolster its capacity to meet the unprecedented socioeconomic crisis. In recent months, some of these individuals have transitioned to permanent, full-time employment within the agency.
- **CARES funding to help families cover other household essentials they could not have received quickly anywhere else.** ABCD purchased computers and internet service for youngsters needing to get back to school; covered car repairs so essential workers could continue to participate in the labor force; and provided personal protection equipment, medication and medical equipment to stay healthy and safe.

A PLATFORM FOR INNOVATION—DRIVEN BY DATA

By allowing the agency to test new program models and to expand critical resources, CSBG has leveraged tens of millions of dollars annually in other public and private resources.

- **Generations Advancing Together through Education (GATE) tested a model of “bundled vouchers” which combined access to education for in-demand jobs and child care for job-seeking mothers**—opening access to vocational preparation for parents who had historically been shut out because they had no care for their children. The program was also supported by a demonstration grant from the federal Department of Labor.
- **CSBG funding allowed ABCD thirty years ago to build and eventually spin off the Urban College of Boston (UCB)—a ground-breaking 2-year college** which is built around the needs of low-income working people. UCB has set new standards for

retention and graduation, especially among women, BIPOC individuals and those with limited English. The College is now a thriving free-standing institution recognized nationally for its success with non-traditional older students.

- **A key public-private partnership is ABCD's publicly utility-funded energy conservation program.** Launched with CSBG support, the program now involves Community Action Agencies across the state of Massachusetts—providing leading-edge heating system replacement, renewable energy resources, and weatherization to thousands of households annually. As a complement to federally-funded energy programs, it leverages nearly a hundred million dollars each year, including matching funds from utility companies, and has become a national model for demand reduction cost savings.

KEY POINTS FOR MODERNIZATION

Today, we have the opportunity to strengthen the impact of the Community Services Block Grant through judicious modernization laid out in the bill. One example of this includes the increase to 200% of poverty:

- Historically, CSBG eligibility has been set at 125% of the Federal Poverty Level. This is \$27,150 in annual income for a family of three, which translates to \$2,263 per month before taxes. However, in our part of the country, a 1-bedroom apartment typically rents for about \$2,000 per month, which is a formula for not being able to meet any other expenses such as food, medication, clothing and other necessities. Going back to the 125% harms the chances of people moving out of poverty.
- **Many households at income levels up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level are experiencing severe distress.** Recognizing this, Congress expanded eligibility for regular and CARES CSBG to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed ABCD to serve many families in need who would have otherwise been turned away. Massachusetts is one of the most expensive states to live in in the nation. Modifying the permanent CSBG income eligibility level to 200% of FPL will respond to the economic reality faced by many vulnerable families.

Although, in many ways, the core issues of poverty are the same across the country, the response needed from each local Community Action Agency can and does look very different – in communities that are rural and urban, large and small, eastern and western and much more. CSBG is the only funding source that allows the kind of flexibility and innovation to meet those diverse needs. Your past support of CSBG has made a huge difference in the lives of people in all our communities, including the historic CARES funding that responded to a once in a lifetime pandemic.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation. We respectfully request that your committee provide this bill with a favorable report.