

**Testimony by  
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**U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Financial Services  
Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance**

**“Preserving a Lifeline: Examining Public Housing in a Pandemic.”**

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My name is Tamir Ali Mohamud, I serve as the Vice-President of the Minneapolis Highrise Representative Council, the independent city-wide public housing high rise tenant organization which represents the interests of over 5,000 residents in forty-two Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) high rises. I am also a Resident Commissioner on MPHA’s Board of Commissioners and the President of my resident council at 1515 Park Avenue South.

I was born in 1946 in Mogadishu, Somalia. Raised in a traditional extended family, I was educated in Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia, from elementary to university level. I accomplished my intermediate school in 1976, and I joined a teacher’s training skill. After graduation, I was assigned as a middle school science teacher where I worked for four years. After these four years of my middle school career, I joined a high level college of education to become a high school teacher. After I spent two years of degree preparation, I received a BA degree and became a high school history teacher.

In 1990 the Somali government collapsed when the civil war erupted. It was a sad moment for all Somali people to see such tragedy where all civil and government institutions failed to function. Because of this disaster, I fled my homeland and was forced to live as a refugee in neighboring Kenya. There, I worked for the United Nations High Commission providing English/Somali translation and interpretive services for individuals being processed to be with their families in other countries. Life in the resettlement camp was difficult. People lived in tents, it was crowded, lonely and cut off from the outside world. There were no televisions or radios. The camp was surrounded by a large fence, but people did not feel safe. The Kenyan police protecting us were often harassed.

On March 21, 2001, I came to Minneapolis after being sponsored by my daughter, who came to the USA before me. I came to the United States to be close to family, for job opportunities and to live out the “American Dream.” The United States has a long tradition of welcoming people from all backgrounds and cultures and is a great place for people who must look to live outside of their home country.

I lived with my daughter and her husband until I moved into the public housing high rise at 1515 Park Avenue South. I moved to have my own place and independence. I live in a one-bedroom apartment in an eighteen-story high rise, home to over 200 residents. Moving into my high rise meant becoming neighbors with a diverse community of people and it was the start of the opportunity to become more involved in my building, in my neighborhood, and in the larger community. It presented me the opportunity to become a resident leader. MPHA provided me with a safe and stable home so that I could then focus on helping my community.

I was a teacher in my home country, and it was natural for me to want to get involved and help my community. I started out by getting involved with my Resident Council and got elected as Resident Council Treasurer. I quickly got involved in various aspects of community life, including teaching ESL classes in my building, and being a liaison between residents and management.

I wanted to share education and information with the Somali community, so I became an anchor on a Somali-language cable TV program with the Minneapolis Television Network. We discussed family and cultural issues, as well as topics related to housing and housing law.

Over the years my involvement has grown. I have served in various capacities on my Resident Council (I am currently the president of my resident council) and was also elected to be a Minneapolis Highrise Representative Council (MHRC) board member. With the MHRC, I have an opportunity to be a tenant advocate on important city-wide issues. I serve on several committees, including the Active Living Advisory Committee, the Security Advisory Committee, and the Laundry Project Committee. I am currently Vice President of the MHRC. I am also a Project Lookout volunteer in my building. Project Lookout is volunteer resident security program operating in 28 MPHA high rises.

In November 2015, the MHRC Board voted to recommend to then Mayor Betsy Hodges that she appoint me as the new high rise resident commissioner on the MPHA Board of Commissioners. I still serve in that capacity.

I also am active with Elliot Park Neighborhood Organization. My high rise and two other public housing high rises are located within the Elliot Park Neighborhood. The MHRC encourages residents to become involved in their neighborhood organizations so residents can have a say in important neighborhood issues like safety and redevelopment activities. It also helps the neighborhood be more aware of high rise residents and resident concerns.

Several years ago, I, along with other 6th Ward Resident leaders, helped to organize a successful town hall meeting with former Minneapolis City Council Member Abdi Warsame

(currently MPHA ED/CEO) and the Minneapolis Police Department to discuss neighborhood safety concerns. Resident leaders met several times to plan the agenda and the questions for the meeting and worked to ensure a high resident turnout. Events like these have helped elected officials and residents know one another and have helped residents hold elected officials accountable.

My involvement in my public housing highrise and in the larger community has given me the opportunity to meet and work with many people from different backgrounds. In my own building, I have gotten to know many of my East Indian neighbors by working side by side in the community vegetable gardens at our highrise. We work together to prepare the soil and plant in the spring, and water and weed the garden throughout the summer. In the fall we harvest together and invite all residents to come to the community room to share the healthy produce that was harvested.

In July 2020, MPHA launched the Highrise Health Alliance as a partnership between MPHA residents via the MHRC, the city, county, mental health providers, social service agencies, public health, government, and philanthropy. The Alliance uses health data and residents' lived experiences to develop a shared vision, determine priorities, and deploy strategies that align each sector's unique contributions toward this common purpose. MHRC is a member of this Alliance and I serve on its leadership team. The priorities of the Alliance are jointly decided by the partners and are based on resident surveys, focus groups, and discussions at MHRC Active Living Committee meetings and MHRC board meetings. The outcomes we expect to see will be better medication management, increased attention to and assistance provided to residents experiencing mental health concerns or mental health crises and better coordination between agencies providing services to residents.

When the pandemic hit and Gov. Walz issued the first stay-at-home order last March, MPHA closed the high-rise community rooms and asked residents to stay in their apartments and only go out for appointments, necessary shopping and exercise.

MPHA stopped staff from entering resident apartments for routine maintenance and instead had them do extra cleaning of building entrances and elevators. MPHA provided food boxes and boxed meals by working with community partners when congregate dining and mobile food shelves had to close, including providing halal meals during Ramadan. MPHA hosted a mask drive and through community donations, including Dunwoody Institute, they were able to provide masks for all residents and staff when that became a recommendation for preventing COVID. Through community donations and a grant from the Pohlad foundation, MPHA organized delivery of personal hygiene products to residents after many stores were looted and burned following the police killing of George Floyd in May.

MPHA posted informational signs about mask wearing and physical distancing and worked with Resident Council members and Security to enforce mask mandates. MPHA also restricted the number of visitors that could come into the buildings and added extra security guards to help

control traffic and enforce the mask-wearing rules. Throughout the year, MPHA staff shared information and answered questions at on-going resident meetings held via teleconference due to the pandemic.

MPHA organized on-site COVID testing throughout the pandemic and offered on-site flu shots in the fall. On March 8, MPHA, through its collaboration with the city health department, began vaccinations in high rises and today nearly all 1<sup>st</sup> round of COVID vaccination clinics have been completed at all 42 high rises at MPHA.

Not only has MPHA provided me with stable housing, MPHA has been an important partner with residents. Through resident councils and MHRC board and committee meetings, residents regularly communicate and problem solve with MPHA staff on individual highrise and city-wide issues, like safety and building maintenance. This partnership and cooperation has been invaluable in improving the quality of lives of people living in public housing highrises.

Public housing is a valuable resource to the city of Minneapolis as it means safe and affordable housing for the members of our community who have the greatest need. Homelessness has grown in Minneapolis. We see “tent cities” spring up all around us and there are not enough shelter beds to meet the need. Public housing is one answer to the housing shortage. It is critical that it is preserved and increased. We depend on Congress to provide enough funding to preserve and expand public housing. It has failed in this role for too long. It’s time to provide sufficient funds so that existing public housing homes are no longer lost to disrepair and it’s time to end the prohibitions on construction of new public housing.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.