May 24, 2018

President pro Tempore Toni Atkins
State Capitol, Room 205
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Support for Senate Bill 18 (Skinner)

Dear President pro Tempore Atkins,

On behalf of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), we write in support of Senate Bill 18 (Skinner), which would provide funding for rental assistance, mediation, legal aid, and other programs that prevent households from falling in to homelessness.

LAHSA is a joint powers authority of the City and County of Los Angeles and serves as the lead agency in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (LA CoC). LAHSA is responsible for funding a significant portion of the interim housing, permanent housing, and supportive services for individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County.

Los Angeles County faces a homeless crisis, which has not significantly eased despite our systems of care becoming more efficient, better resourced, and able to house people experiencing homelessness more expediently than ever before. On any given night in Los Angeles County, nearly 53,000 people experience homelessness. This was a decline a 4% from 2017, when about 55,000 people experienced homelessness on any given night. This decline was driven by a steep rise in housing placements: Over the course of 2017, LAHSA-funded programs housed over 16,500 people, a 51% increase from 2015, when just under 11,000 people were placed into homes.¹

While LAHSA is encouraged by the progress being made in moving people from the streets into housing, we are distressed that this progress has only resulted in small declines in the overall population of people experiencing homelessness. More people continue to fall in to homelessness. Between 2017 and 2018, the number of people entering unsheltered homelessness for the first time rose by 14% in the LA CoC, from just over 8,000 in 2017 to over 9,200 in 2018. Of these people entering homelessness for the first time, the majority cite either economic factors such as rising rents, job loss, eviction, or weakening social networks as the primary driver of their homelessness.²

The long-term solution to rising homelessness is a major effort to preserve and build affordable housing. Los Angeles County alone faces a shortage of about 570,000 housing units that are affordable to very-low and extremely-low income households.³ This effort is underway with the passage of 2017’s SB 2, 2018’s Propositions 1 and 2, and other local

² Ibid.
efforts. But building and preserving affordable housing takes time. In the meantime, California must scale up prevention efforts to keep people in their homes stanch the flow of vulnerable households into homelessness.

SB 18 would represent a major step forward in this regard. By creating state funding for rental assistance, legal services, and mediation, California would give local jurisdictions the ability to create services and programs that keep residents stably housed, allowing these jurisdictions to begin making meaningful progress on homelessness. LAHSA, the City of Los Angeles, and the County of Los Angeles have all initiated major homelessness prevention efforts that SB 18 funding could augment. As such, we hope the bill would allow all three entities to be eligible to receive funding for homeless prevention programs.

LAHSA is currently in the process of launching a program aimed at preventing families and individuals from entering the homeless services system. This program comes in recognition that many people would be able to avoid entering homelessness if they were able to receive mediation and targeted financial assistance prior to entering the homeless system. LAHSA is in the process of training staff at locations upstream from the homeless system (such as Department of Children and Family Services or Department of Public Social Services offices). Training will focus on mediation techniques to recognize when a person may have an opportunity to safely reconnect with family and repair their social network.

In addition, LAHSA is establishing a problem-solving fund that will be eligible to pay for a variety of expenses, such as rental arrears, security deposits, grocery cards, or automotive repair to ensure the person at risk can continue to keep their employment. In addition to state funding, the County of Los Angeles is looking to fund this program through their FY 19-20 budget. More robust funding for this program could produce significant impacts on entries to homelessness—a similar program in Cleveland successfully prevented about one-third of entries into their homeless system.

The City of Los Angeles has also proposed a right to counsel program, which would guarantee legal representation to low-income tenants facing eviction if sufficiently funded. Research shows that legal representation has a significant impact on tenants’ likelihood of staying in their homes, and initial outcomes from right to counsel in New York have shown significant declines in evictions. Funding a program like this in Los Angeles could have a significant impact on family homelessness; in 2017, 24% of newly homeless families cited eviction or foreclosure as their primary reason for entering homelessness.

We hope the legislature will move SB 18 forward to the Governor’s desk and seek robust funding for the program in the budget to ensure the bill has meaningful impacts on the many precariously housed people statewide. We appreciate your office’s leadership and look forward to working with you in this effort.

Sincerely,

Sarah Dusseault
Vice Chair, LAHSA Commission

Peter Lynn
Executive Director

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