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For Immediate Release

## Two 2025 Kathy A. Possinger Housing Policy Fellows announced

*Funded research will benefit policymakers and the affordable housing industry*

**HARRISBURG, PA** – The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency has named Jessica Aviva and Marrea Walker-Smith as its 2025 Kathy A. Possinger Housing Policy Fellowship recipients. Both Aviva and Walker-Smith will receive a financial stipend of up to \$12,000 during the year to conduct research benefiting the affordable housing industry.

“PHFA supports this housing fellowship because it produces a number of important benefits,” said PHFA Executive Director and CEO Robin Wiessmann. “We have a responsibility to prepare the next generation of housing thought-leaders, and this fellowship helps to do that. Also, during the first five years of this fellowship, we have begun compiling a valuable archive of original research by our fellows, which benefits housing professionals working throughout the state. Congratulations to both of this year’s outstanding housing policy fellows.”

One new housing policy fellow is Jessica Aviva, who is the founding director of The Fruition Coalition, which supports the health and vibrancy of organizations and communities. She has also worked as a senior advisor with Hailstone Economic in Scranton, a small business that helps government, businesses and nonprofits with projects to bring lasting positive change in their communities.

Aviva holds a doctorate in organizational leadership, as well as degrees in sociology, nonprofit management, and marketing. Among her lengthy list of professional accomplishments, she has authored 11 books, facilitated numerous housing programs in northeastern and north-central Pennsylvania, is a board member with Two Rivers Health and Wellness Foundation, and is a member of the community leadership team of South Side Easton Blueprint Communities.

Aviva’s research will explore the state of fair housing in rural Pennsylvania and identify ways to help rural communities ensure fair housing opportunities are provided there. Her research proposal notes that rural counties have experienced an influx of people moving from urban areas as they seek more affordable housing. Her research will assist rural communities with tools to ensure that the fair housing rights of newcomers are protected.

The second new housing fellow, Marrea Walker-Smith, designs and implements high school business courses for Devon Preparatory School. She is a consultant with the Chester Housing Authority and County of Chester Housing Authority. She is a former consultant with the Chester County Economic Development Council and served 17 years in Chester city government. She currently is working on a master’s degree in economics and entrepreneurship for educators at the University of Delaware. She holds numerous degrees, including two other master’s degrees. She currently is writing her doctoral dissertation, which will align with her research as a PHFA policy fellow.

Walker-Smith partnered with the Chester Housing Authority to launch the first Entrepreneur Innovation Center in a public housing development in Chester. During the last year, she has provided support for residents to earn industry standard certificates in social media, business, and entrepreneurship. Most recently, she spearheaded a grant awarded for \$1.5 million for the new Chester e-Health Center, which

will provide support with telehealth visits, health technology training for employment, and nurse's aide training as a pipeline for healthcare positions.

Walker-Smith's research proposal notes how African Americans who reside in low-income housing developments face significant barriers to financial independence. Her project will explore the role of financial literacy in decision making, financial independence and self-sufficiency for residents in low-income housing developments in Chester. A key goal of the research is to collaborate with the residents to develop a financial education workshop and e-book to help them, and housing providers, better understand the impact of financial literacy on poverty so the lives of people in these situations can be improved.

The stipends provided to both these researchers through PHFA's housing policy fellowship can be used for a variety of activities supporting the fellows' approved research, including interviews with experts, securing resources and study materials, and travel for attending relevant conferences.

This is the sixth year of PHFA's housing policy fellowship. In 2021, the fellowship was renamed the Kathy A. Possinger Housing Policy Fellowship in honor of PHFA board designee and affordable housing champion Kathy Possinger. She was a passionate affordable housing advocate who served Pennsylvanians for two decades through her work in both the public and private sectors.

#### About PHFA

The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency works to provide affordable homeownership and rental housing options for older adults, low- and moderate-income families, and people with special housing needs. Through its carefully managed mortgage programs and investments in multifamily housing developments, PHFA also promotes economic development across the state. Since its creation by the legislature in 1972, it has generated more than \$18.9 billion of funding for more than 201,500 single-family home mortgage loans, helped fund the construction of 103,328 rental units, distributed approximately \$289 million to support local housing initiatives, and saved the homes of more than 50,860 families from foreclosure. PHFA programs and operations are funded primarily by the sale of securities and from fees paid by program users, not by public tax dollars. The agency is governed by a 14-member board.

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