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## **Ben Carson at confirmation hearing: I see the federal housing agency as a tool for healing division**

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Ben Carson, President-elect Donald Trump's pick to run the Department of Housing and Urban Development, sees the agency as a tool to help solve what he calls America's "divisiveness," he was to tell lawmakers Thursday at his confirmation hearing.

Carson, a former pediatric neurosurgeon with no government experience, has faced scrutiny about why he wants to run the agency, which provides billions of dollars for public housing and other programs.

"It's a good question," Carson wrote in prepared remarks released ahead of his hearing before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs. "I want to help heal America's divisiveness, and I think HUD is positioned to help in that healing. One of our biggest threats right now is this political division, racial conflict and class warfare. It is ripping this country apart."

Carson, 65, a former Republican candidate for president, opened the hearing talking about his childhood in poverty in Detroit as the son of a domestic worker, though not in public housing. He said he is interested in working on problems of substandard housing, which can cause poisoning, asthma and other health problems.

"If we can give those people hope, then they can move out of those situations," he testified. "But giving them hope starts with giving them a safe and productive environment."

Carson has expressed skepticism about the role of government programs in helping the poor, but he told the committee that his views have been "distorted."

"Government can play a very important role," he said. "When you think of HUD traditionally, it is putting roofs over the heads of poor people, but it has the opportunity to be so much more."

He was expected to face tough questioning about his lack of experience.

"Although you have many accomplishments in the medical field, there is relatively little in the public record that reveals how you would further HUD's mission to 'create strong, sustainable,

inclusive communities and quality affordable homes for all,” Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), a committee member, wrote in a letter to Carson this week.

The department was started during President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty program in the 1960s. With a \$47.8-billion budget, it is responsible for administering grants to public housing agencies around the country, providing vouchers for rental housing under Section 8 and managing the Federal Housing Administration, which provides mortgage insurance and, in the wake of the housing crisis, began administering many troubled loans for homeowners. It enforces the Fair Housing Act, which forbids discrimination.

Carson rose to become, at 33, chief of the pediatric neurosurgery department at Johns Hopkins University. He talks about that history as helping to prepare him to run HUD. “I grew up in the inner city and spent a lot of time there and dealt with a lot of patients,” Carson said in November on Fox News. “We cannot have a strong nation if we have weak inner cities.”

But the experience left with him a deep skepticism about the effectiveness of government in eradicating poverty. In one of his few pronouncements on housing policy, Carson wrote a 2015 [opinion piece](#) that questioned a new fair housing rule by the Obama administration.

“There are reasonable ways to use housing policies to enhance the opportunities available to lower-income citizens, but based on the history of failed socialist experiments in this country, entrusting the government to get it right can prove downright dangerous,” Carson wrote.

In taking over the agency, Carson will also be tasked with managing an agency with a long history of corruption scandals and sweetheart deals – some of them in Republican administrations.

“It’s a real risk,” said Mark A. Calabria, an economist at the Cato Institute. “It’s one of those things that if he doesn’t keep an eye on, he’s going to have some scandals blow up in his face. That’s always a potential with HUD.”

Disaster relief programs administered by the housing department after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Superstorm Sandy in 2012 also had [woeful records](#) of fraud and mismanagement.

Before Thursday’s hearing, the transition team for President-elect Donald Trump released an endorsement for Carson from four former housing secretaries: Henry Cisneros, Mel Martinez, Alphonso Jackson and Steven Preston. Cisneros served under President Clinton, and the others under George W. Bush.

“Some of us came in with deep housing experience while others had to learn it,” they wrote. “The singular, common piece of advice every HUD secretary is given is to listen.”

Calabria, a former Housing and Urban Development official and a former staffer on the Senate banking committee, said that Carson, like all housing secretaries, will face entrenched interests: thousands of public housing agencies, advocates and big-city mayors who depend on community development block grant funds.

“If I were a betting man, I would bet that Ben Carson will hand over HUD that looks much the same as it does now,” he said.