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Opening Statement

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Subcommittee on Health Care, District of Columbia, Census and National Archives **Hearing on "McPherson Square: Who Made the Decision to Allow Indefinite Camping in** **the Park?"**

January 24, 2012

Thank you, Chairman Gowdy and Ranking Member Davis, for holding today's hearing and providing us an opportunity to speak up on behalf of the millions of Americans who are demanding justice and fairness from both their government and elements of the private sector.

In fact, Mr. Chairman, in many ways I find it baffling that we are actually convening this morning's hearing to debate the merits of allowing Americans to use their public parks as a venue in which to express their First Amendment rights, a practice that is as old as our Republic and as fundamental to our Democracy as our constitution, which guarantees the right of assembly.

Even more alarming is that the majority has fast tracked today's hearing, while repeatedly ignoring and dragging their feet on our request to fully investigate mortgage servicer's alleged abuses against American families. Given the extent of the foreclosure crisis and the harm it has caused so many homeowners across the nation, I am deeply concerned about the Committee's failure to use its investigative power to protect American consumers or examine the numerous allegations of wrongdoing by banks.

I have repeatedly raised these concerns – and today, I sent a letter to the Chairman renewing my request for a comprehensive investigation into wrongful foreclosures and other abuses by mortgage servicing companies.

While neglecting the harm that many Americans are suffering at the hands of mortgage servicers, the Majority has leapt to investigate whether banks have been the victims of abuse from American citizens.

The Majority sent letters to several banks requesting information that supports the highly improbable allegation that representatives of the Occupy movement attempted to extort major

banks. The responses have stated that the banks are not aware of any instances of the alleged conduct.

That said, I to want to welcome our witnesses and thank you for agreeing to come before us today.

The District of Columbia is no stranger to the host of challenges and benefits that come with being home to the national government in the world's oldest democracy. Given the constant stream of citizen demonstrations, special events, marches and petitions for the redress of grievances, I recognize that balancing the right of our fellow citizens to assemble peacefully while simultaneously protecting the health, safety and property of the City's residents and visitors is no easy task.

Therefore, I applaud both the City government and the myriad of federal agencies that work collectively and routinely to balance these interests.

When folks are hurting and struggling, as many Americans presently are, it's all-the-more critical that they be able to raise their voices and to demand change. The recent Occupy Movement that has emerged in cities and communities across this great nation represents the people's demand for progress.

They want jobs, they want better treatment, they adequate housing and most importantly they want action. And they have the Constitutional right to make their voices heard.

While practical considerations associated with the prolonged presence of the Occupy DC protestors at McPherson Square must certainly be addressed, concerns over grass seeds shouldn't outweigh grassroots efforts to seek improvements and help for our most vulnerable citizens, nor should rats be allowed to stand in the way of the demand for real reform, especially when there are easy ways to rectify such problems at limited cost.

A little over a week ago, our country came together to celebrate the life and legacy of the legendary Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who stood for equal opportunity and equal rights for all. Dr. King exemplified how the peaceful exercise of the rights enshrined in our Constitution can truly change the world. Reverence for these rights must remain at the heart of all that we are as a nation.

Again, I thank each of our witnesses for coming before us today and I especially want to express my heartfelt sympathy to you, Director Jarvis, for your Agency's recent loss of Park Ranger Margaret Anderson in Mt. Rainer, Washington. It's truly an unfortunate reminder that are federal public servants are in fact exposed to significant risks while performing their daily duties.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

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