



# Jesup Housing Authority

327 Bay Acres Road Jesup, GA 31545  
Phone (912) 427-2535 Fax (912) 427-3309  
[www.jesuphousingauthority.com](http://www.jesuphousingauthority.com)

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*Mark A. Watson, Executive Director*

*Commissioners:  
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Sadie Jackson*

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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The Georgia General Assembly is poised to send a strong message to those who attempt to defraud the government through the public housing program. The message: If you attempt to cheat the government by reporting a false income or by leaving the public housing authority with an outstanding debt, your state tax refund will be kept to offset the amount of your debt. Representative Mark Williams (District 178) has introduced legislation in the Georgia General Assembly that will add public housing authorities to the existing list of claimant agencies in Georgia and allow them to collect bad debt created through their leasing of apartments at public housing authorities. House Bill 327 has been assigned to the Public Policy Subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee and has bipartisan support in the Georgia General Assembly. According to Mark Watson, Executive Director of the Jesup Housing Authority, former public housing residents in Georgia owe an estimated \$16.6 million in outstanding debt created through unreported income and other charges associated with their stay in public housing. "Locally here at the JHA, we currently have an uncollected outstanding balance of over \$242,000 from former residents that left owing a balance," states Watson. "The outstanding balance is largely made up of false income reporting by residents. Here at the JHA, we have a collaborative agreement with the Georgia Department of Labor that allows us to receive the actual amount of income of our residents through their databases. It's not a matter of if we will find out residents' true income, it's a matter of when," says Watson. Use of the Georgia Department of Labor databases, along with HUD's Earned Income Verification (EIV) System, gives housing authorities the tools they need to insure that no one is getting a free ride. According to Watson, a large portion of the outstanding balance at Jesup is from retroactive rent being placed on a resident's account, which leads to them abandoning the apartment and leaving a rental balance on their account. Allowing housing authorities to recoup this balance will improve the financial conditions of the 188 public housing authorities in the state of Georgia who have faced federal funding shortfalls over the last several years. According to Watson, PHA's (public housing authorities) in the United States are only allotted 76% of their necessary funding,

as determined by an independent third party (Harvard.) With that funding crisis, times are tight at the JHA and other PHA's across the country. Watson states that allowing the PHA's in Georgia to collect the outstanding balances from former residents will help in addressing the federal funding shortfall. "House Bill 327 is the right thing to do, no doubt about it," states Watson. "It sends a clear message to those who would consider misreporting their income that you can pay now or pay later; either way, you are going to pay your part," says Watson. "The Georgia Association of Housing and Redevelopment Authorities support Rep. Mark Williams on this bill and appreciate his advocacy on this legislative point. His authorship of this bill is the right thing for the tax-paying citizens of this state," states Watson.

A hearing on House Bill 327 will be conducted on Wednesday, 2/21/07, before the Public Policy Subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee.



*Representative Mark Williams (District 178) introduces House Bill 327 at the Georgia General Assembly.*



*Mark Watson, Executive Director of the Jesup Housing Authority and Chairman of the Georgia Association of Housing and Redevelopment Authorities State Legislative Committee testifies before the House Ways and Means Committee regarding HB-327.*