

# BUILDING OUR FUTURE

grassroots reflections on **social housing**



# REPORT BUILDERS



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Soaring housing costs and continual economic instability across the country are striking at the core of our communities' well-being and social fabric. Corporate landlords driven by profit have expanded their control over our homes. And Wall Street investors are gambling on real estate at unprecedented levels, unleashing gentrification, flipping for a profit, and vacancy alongside homelessness in our neighborhoods. Today, millions face the daunting reality of skyrocketing costs and the constant threat of eviction and displacement. The increasing use of housing as a wealth and investment vehicle, the concentration of profit-driven corporate control of housing, and the political and financial retreat of the state are key drivers of our housing affordability crisis.**

This report, "Building Our Future: Grassroots Reflections on Social Housing," delves into the urgent need for social housing as a radical, transformative, and common-sense solution to our housing crisis. A growing movement of organizers is advocating for permanently and deeply affordable social housing, that is publicly, collectively or non-profit owned and under democratic resident or community control. Through tenant unions, rent strikes, and policy campaigns, groups are demanding public, government intervention to overcome catastrophic market failures and ensure housing for everyone.

As the report makes clear, campaigns for social housing are underway across various regions, for example: in California, organizers claim legislative victories such as SB 555, which mandates a government study on social housing; in Seattle, the establishment of the Seattle Social Housing Developer (SSHD) to build publicly owned, permanently affordable housing; and in Kansas City, Missouri, organizers secured a \$50 million bond for affordable housing and through mass tenant organizing are shifting towards campaigns for building municipal social housing.

This report, crafted by organizers, policy analysts, and educators rooted in housing, racial, and climate justice movements, is intended to serve as a rallying cry and blueprint for transformational housing futures.



# PRINCIPLES

- **Social housing is housing that is permanently and deeply affordable;** publicly, non-profit or collectively owned; and protected from the private market. It is grounded in principles of equity, racial justice, community control, tenant power, and climate and environmental justice. Social housing includes quality public housing, community land trusts, and tenant or resident cooperatives.
- **Across the country, grassroots campaigns are advancing housing that is for people, not profit.** In this report, frontline organizers share their experiences, challenges, and successes in advancing social housing. While tactics and strategies range – from directly confronting for-profit landlords to running ballot measures – campaigns are united by a shared commitment to decommodifying housing and building a new housing system where housing is for people, and not profit.
- **Policy solutions must center the people and communities who are most impacted.** Tenant unions, organizations of unhoused people, and others who are deeply impacted by our housing crisis, are putting forward and advancing solutions to best meet our communities' needs. These voices and advocacy are critical for social housing proposals.
- **Diverse models** such as community land trusts, tenant cooperatives, and quality public housing **are part and parcel of the social housing toolbox.** Public housing serves over a million low-income families, offering deeply affordable homes and fostering community resilience. Yet, chronic underfunding and privatization threaten its viability, necessitating bold policy reforms and massive investments in updating and expanding its reach.
- The organizations authoring and highlighted in the report represent some of **the leading grassroots organizations at the forefront of the fight for housing justice across the United States**, including in New York, California, Texas, Missouri, Maryland, Washington State and more. The report, a culmination of extensive translocal collaboration, sheds light on the root causes of the housing crisis impacting communities in large and small cities, in red and blue states, and presents social housing as a viable solution.



## GRASSROOTS REFLECTIONS

The bulk of this report presents grassroots reflections on the housing commodification crisis and the emergence of social housing campaigns across the United States. Through interviews and written responses, frontline activists share their experiences, challenges, and successes in advocating for social housing. Organizers, researchers, and policy advocates from various jurisdictions and institutions contribute insights into past and ongoing campaigns, as well as future plans. While the highlighted groups exemplify the diverse efforts toward housing justice, they represent only a portion of the broader social housing organizing landscape. Despite differences in progress and tactics, these groups share a common commitment to housing as a fundamental human right, free from private profiteering and exploitation.

## THE MOVEMENT NOW & THE MOVEMENT AHEAD

The report concludes with an analysis and summary of where the social housing movement is, and where it is headed. Social housing is experiencing a clear resurgence, fueled by grassroots organizing and a shared vision of housing justice. The pandemic laid bare the precariousness of housing, highlighting the urgent need for meaningful government response and community-driven solutions.

Campaigns for social housing are diverse, reflecting the unique contexts and histories of local communities. From California to Connecticut, organizers are pushing for a range of interventions, from rent stabilization measures to the establishment of community land trusts and public development authorities. While the strategies may vary, the goal remains consistent: long-term structural change to the housing system.

The movement for social housing is gaining momentum, with grassroots contests, legislative efforts, and ballot initiatives driving change at the local and national levels. By building coalitions, engaging in direct action, and leveraging political power, organizers are challenging the status quo and advancing a vision of housing as a fundamental human right.

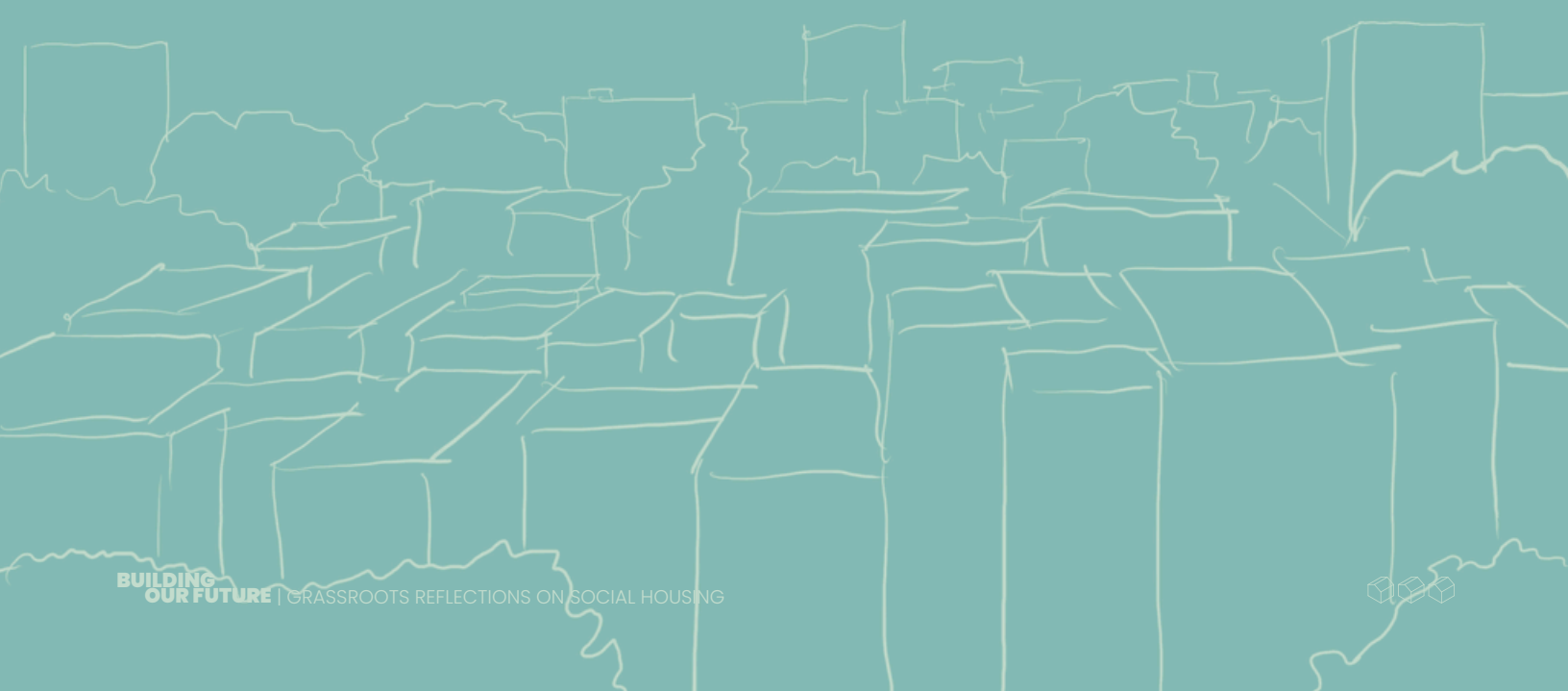
As we look ahead, it is crucial to prioritize inclusivity and deep affordability in social housing initiatives. Grassroots groups are advocating for policies and practices that prioritize the lowest-income brackets and ensure access for historically excluded communities. Housing advocates, policymakers, and organizers must continue to listen to the solutions lifted up by those who are most harmed and most deeply impacted. By centering the demands and power of impacted communities and fostering mutual learning and collaboration, we can create a more equitable and sustainable housing system. Social housing will be most effective in meeting immediate needs, and in creating a more equitable and sustainable housing system, if policymakers heed these calls.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01 **A Case for Social Housing**
- 02 **The Commons**
- 03 **Grassroots Reflections**
  - Local**
    - Bay Area
    - Houston
    - Inland Empire
    - Los Angeles
    - Kansas City
    - Seattle
  - Statewide**
    - California
    - Connecticut
    - Illinois
    - Maryland
    - New York
    - Rhode Island
    - Washington DC
  - National**
- 04 **The Movement Now/The Movement Ahead**
- 05 **What Comes Next?**

01

# THE CASE FOR SOCIAL HOUSING



# THE CASE FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

In the wake of soaring housing costs, communities across the United States face an enduring crisis that strikes at the heart of our collective health, prosperity, and humanity. For decades, working-class families have grappled with the harsh reality of housing instability, as private markets commodified housing to generate profits and wealth. These for-profit systems have fueled predatory practices, gentrification, and displacement, ripping apart the stability and cohesion of our neighborhoods—and our neighbors. Today, the crisis is at one of its worst points: millions of people in the United States face staggering and escalating housing costs, and a constant threat of eviction and homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

The increasing use of housing as a wealth and investment vehicle (“financialization”), the concentration of profit-driven corporate control of housing, and the political and financial retreat of the state are key drivers of our housing affordability crisis. Each year, our communities lose hundreds of thousands of affordable rental homes to rent increases. Lower-income households have the fewest options and least access to affordable and available housing. With the COVID-19 pandemic, large corporate landlords expanded their control over our homes, as millions of Americans continue to face unbearable rent hikes and evictions. Corporate landlords are even investing in the lucrative “affordable housing” sector and reaping the benefits of government subsidies, while raking in profits at the expense of low-income tenants.

Amidst this bleak landscape, organizers, tenants, and communities are resisting, and advancing a radically different and bold vision for the future: social housing.



Social housing is a call to action to embrace a future where every individual has safe, affordable, and dignified housing, to disrupt the failing and harmful status quo, and to build the power of communities and strengthen our democracy. This report on the state of our movements for social housing was crafted by organizers, policy analysts, and educators rooted in racial, gender, and economic justice movements across the country. By capturing the stories and ideas of community-driven solutions, we hope this report can serve as a rallying cry and blueprint to meet our most pressing challenges.

<sup>1</sup> *America's Rental Housing*, Joint Center For Housing Studies Of Harvard University (“in 2022, half of all U.S. renters were cost burdened. This all-time high of 22.4 million renter households spent more than 30 percent of their income on rent and utilities”).  
[https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/reports/files/Harvard\\_JCHS\\_Americas\\_Rental\\_Housing\\_2024.pdf](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/reports/files/Harvard_JCHS_Americas_Rental_Housing_2024.pdf)





# WHAT IS SOCIAL HOUSING?

Social housing is a public option for housing that would create an unprecedented investment in high quality, permanently affordable housing across the country in urban, suburban, and rural communities. As racial justice and housing justice organizers, we see social housing as grounded in a set of key values:

1 Social housing is housing that is **high quality, permanently** and **deeply affordable** for everyone, including for those lowest-income households.

2 Social housing is **publicly or collectively owned**, and is under **democratic community control**. Resident associations, tenant unions, and surrounding communities play key roles in managing it.

3 Social housing is **insulated from the market** and publicly-backed. It is not a source of profit and has sufficient government backing to meet its goals.

4 Social housing refers to more than an individual building or housing complex: it is a **system of laws, policies, and institutions** that helps make housing affordable and accessible for everyone, even for those in privately-owned residences.





## WHAT IS SOCIAL HOUSING?

Racial justice is another key value and guidepost for social housing. As a form of community wealth-building, social housing can help repair centuries of predatory, colonial, and exploitative wealth extraction from low-income communities of color.

Social housing at scale requires a supportive infrastructure of public and non-profit financing. Rather than having for-profit investors fund housing (as it currently operates), a robust system of public and non-profit enterprises such as public banks, public development agencies, cooperative lending, revolving community funds, and public land banking can be deployed.

Organizing for truly affordable social housing also increasingly complements and intersects with a renewed labor organizing movement and other fights to repair the United States' broken social safety nets. Creating and maintaining social housing can create secure, well-paying jobs for residents throughout the lifecycle of buildings.

An increasingly critical and prevalent value of social housing is that it is "green," i.e. energy efficient, disaster resilient, and produced through sustainable renovation, rehabilitation, and construction methods. Green social housing is healthy and safe from environmental contaminants in soil, air, and buildings. Green social housing ensures that unhoused people and low-income renters most harmed by climate disasters have access to safe, quality, habitable, but also permanently affordable homes.

## GREEN SOCIAL HOUSING

The impetus to deliver on social housing is already abundantly clear, and the climate crisis adds even more urgency. Tenants and unhoused people are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. And the housing sector itself is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for nearly a quarter of all emissions in the United States. Buildings consume a vast amount of energy, while construction requires resources and generates waste. The private sector's focus on for-profit luxury construction is not only failing to meet our affordable housing needs, but is wasteful and unsustainable, and leading to cheap design practices that further harm the safety and health of tenants in our climate crisis. Government-supported, not-for-profit social housing, with a focus on repurposing vacant and empty buildings, is needed to not only create climate-adapted communities, but also to mitigate emissions.

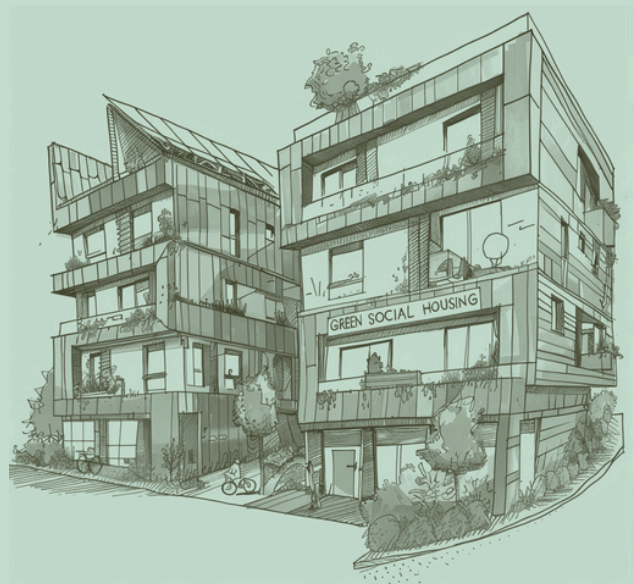
There are 16 million vacant homes in the United States, many of which are owned by for-profit landlords. Acquiring and converting these homes to green social housing prevents homelessness while decarbonizing buildings and making the places we live resilient in the face of increasing weather disasters. Green planning can also reduce transportation emissions by co-locating important services in developments that also create jobs for residents.

Social housing is most effective at maintaining lasting and far-reaching affordability, across whole housing systems, when it operates at scale: it should be available to all who need it, and eventually for the majority of residents, including moderate-income households. As organizers rooted in tenant and racial justice movements, we believe that it is imperative for social housing programs to be steered by, and to first prioritize, those most in need: low-income households, people of color, and families marginalized by existing housing markets who have the least housing options.

This prioritization is necessary to most effectively curb homelessness and displacement in real time, since housing production takes years, and mixed-income developments situated in low-income neighborhoods can fuel exclusion or displacement.

Social housing can and does take a variety of forms, which movements are advocating for in response to conditions on the ground. It includes models for non-profit community control such as community land trusts (CLTs) and limited equity affordable housing cooperatives (LEHCs), as well as quality public housing.

Public housing, often viewed as the most prevalent form of social housing, is a critical source of permanently and deeply affordable housing for the lowest-income families. But lawmakers have from its inception underfunded it, and gutted funding further in the last four decades, while enacting racist and punitive policies that criminalize its residents. The 1998 Faircloth Amendment limited the amount of public housing that the federal government could build, while federal programs like HOPE VI and RAD have privatized, demolished, and redeveloped public housing in ways that fuelled the mass displacement of tenants. As a result, the U.S. has lost one quarter of its public housing units in the last decade. All of these policies need to be rolled back. Federal proposals such as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez' Green New Deal for Public Housing also point to the urgent need for existing public housing to be fully repaired, modernized, and greened without displacing tenants.

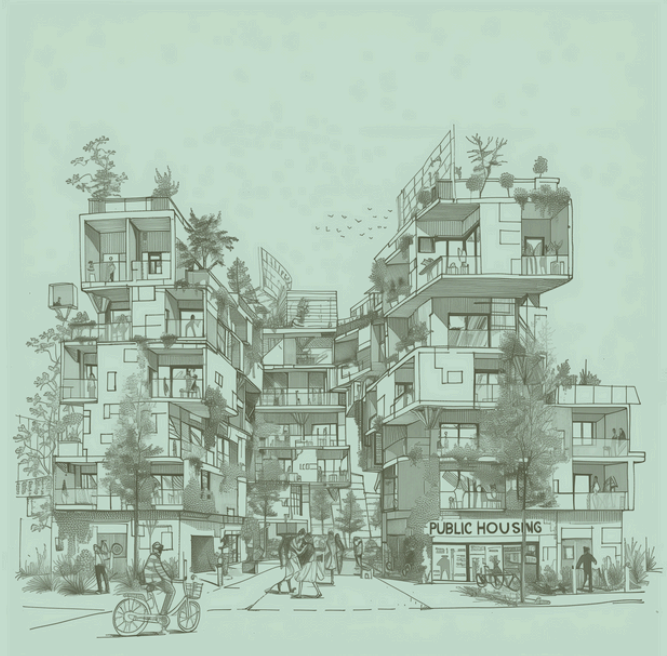


## PUBLIC HOUSING AS SOCIAL HOUSING

The most well-known social housing in the United States is our 87-year-old public housing system, which currently serves over 1 million diverse, low-income families across the country.

Public housing is funded by the federal government; owned and operated by local housing authorities; and created, owned, and operated in the public's interest, not for profit. Public housing is a critical source of social housing for the lowest-income families. Its deep level of affordability has historically been enabled by direct public funding. For many residents, public housing not only offers a roof over their heads, but also fosters community building and provides stability, supportive services, and a pathway to economic and educational opportunities. Public housing residents have fought hard to win the right to organize and mechanisms for resident input in management. Public housing is permanently, deeply affordable and guarantees tenants have strong rights and protections that are typically not extended to private market residents or even to other types of subsidized housing residents.

Importantly, public housing offers a foundational model for creating sustainable housing on public land that is deeply affordable for all, even the lowest-income households. When sufficiently resourced, it can nurture strong, diverse, and resilient communities and advance reparative justice and spatial equity for those who have been marginalized, discriminated against, disinvested from, and displaced. The foundational principles of public housing, stripped of their original segregative implementation, are worth restoring and can be made available on a large scale, in all states, with the support of the federal government, to ensure that the basic needs of all people and communities are met.



Public housing rules provide meaningful tenant protections, including eviction protection through grievance rights, just cause for eviction, rights against displacement, and resident organizing rights. To align more closely with our principles of social housing, public housing should be strengthened by more robust tenant control, sufficient government investment, and expansion into more communities. Policies criminalizing public housing residents such as “one-strike” laws must be repealed and public housing must also be made accessible to people with arrest and conviction records and mixed-immigration status families. By doing so, public housing can more effectively contribute to the creation of equitable, sustainable, and inclusive communities, laying a solid foundation for a comprehensive social housing system.

Our vision for social housing includes, as its central goal, a rejuvenated and expanded public housing system.

***For more, read the full report on public housing and social housing [here](#), and the Jacobin essay “[Public Housing is Social Housing](#).”***

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL HOUSING IN THE UNITED STATES

The history of social housing in the United States has risen and fallen with the progress of the working class. For over a century, people in the United States have organized for public investment in housing, built self-sustaining housing co-operatives and community land trusts, and fought to recover land and housing from predatory landlords and banks. In the early 1930s, the national Labor Housing Conference took inspiration from workers' movements in Europe to push for mass public and cooperative housing. When the government fell short, labor unions built cooperative housing for their own workers. During the Civil Rights era, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Chicago Freedom Movement occupied slum housing and conducted rent strikes to demand desegregation and permanently stable, livable, and affordable housing. ACT UP organizers made the right to housing a cornerstone demand of the LGBTQ+ rights movement at the height of the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic. Despite privatization and mass demolitions, public housing tenants from coast to coast have relentlessly organized to fund improvements to their homes.

The federal government has been encouraging homeownership at least since the 1917 “own your own home” campaign. Large scale federal intervention in housing began with the New Deal, primarily in promoting racially-segregated homeownership, thanks in part to pressure from the real estate industry. Investment in public housing was limited from the start, thanks to a real estate industry that pushed the government into limiting its scope and size. Starting with massive cuts to public housing in the 1980s, the government has continued to withdraw from its responsibility to provide affordable housing and prioritized providing incentives for the private sector to step into the breach.

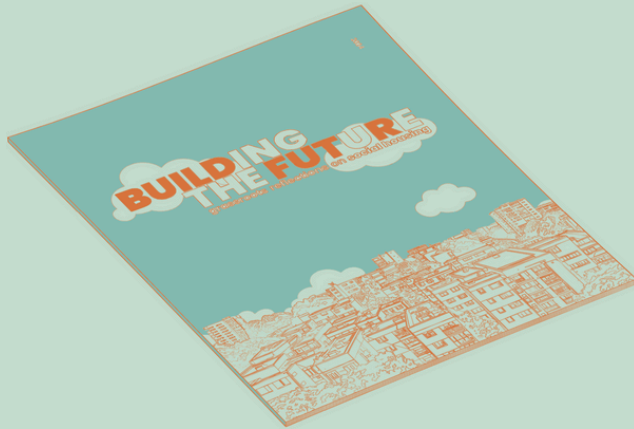
This retreat has been justified in part by an explicit and explicitly racist campaign by investors to have the state criminalize public housing residents, low-income communities of color, and the unhoused.

The 2008 foreclosure crisis demonstrated how for-profit banks and Wall Street investors continued this racialized approach by preying on and stripping wealth from Black and Brown communities especially: predatory subprime lending targeted women of color, who then suffered especially high foreclosure rates. The recession that followed cut Black and brown wealth in half. Afterwards, corporate landlords bought up massive portfolios of foreclosed property with government support. Yet government programs for subsidized, affordable housing largely rely on partnerships with for-profit investors and for-profit landlords, despite these awful track records.

In many respects, our federal, state and local governments have withdrawn from their responsibility to guarantee affordable housing as a public good and human right. Many programs operate through public-private partnerships with for-profit actors, allowing corporate landlords to profit at the expense of tenants. They typically provide only temporary affordability, that is still out of reach for the majority of those most in need.

The primary federal mechanism for creating “affordable housing” is the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program, which gives for-profit investors tax incentives to invest in lower-income housing. However, the reality is that large corporate landlords are benefiting from these tax breaks while profiting from rent increases and evicting tenants as LIHTC affordability requirements expire. Additionally, the Housing Choice Voucher Program (known as Section 8), another critical component of the federal housing strategy, is plagued by chronic underfunding and restrictive means-testing. Moreover, vouchers often require recipients to find a for-profit landlord in the competitive private market to rent from; many tenants with vouchers face outright discrimination as landlords refuse to rent to them, rendering their vouchers unusable.

# ABOUT THIS REPORT



Although public-private partnerships like LIHTC and Section 8 are designed to serve a pressing need, their efficacy is significantly compromised by their dependence on the private market and for-profit actors. The result is a failure to deliver housing solutions that are both adequate in volume and genuinely affordable for the communities that need it most. Only a paradigm shift toward public, not-for-profit financing will reverse and rectify this crisis. Such a shift would ensure that housing policy prioritizes human needs over profit motives, aligning with the principle that housing is a fundamental right for all, not a commodity for a few.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, renters have organized tenant unions and rent strikes in growing numbers, to cancel or limit rents, improve building conditions, and to renew public investment in truly affordable housing. Organizers have demanded government intervention—at all levels—to curb the ups and downs of market-driven rents, and overcome the private sector’s inability to produce truly affordable housing at scale. Today, tenant, labor, racial justice, environmental justice, and other movement groups are advocating for social housing, and for all levels of government to step up where the reliance on the private market and privatization of subsidized housing have unambiguously failed. Social housing will provide affordable, secure homes, stabilize communities, and create well-paying jobs. Social housing can counter Wall Street and corporate control of the housing market; the climate crisis; and deep-seated race, gender, and other inequities in access to housing.

The authors of this paper, organizers, policy analysts, and educators rooted in racial, gender, and economic justice movements, have long been working on and analyzing the drivers of the present housing crisis — and how to chart a way out of it. Our work spans multiple scales and forums: from base-building within regional tenants’ unions, to statewide electoral and policy campaigns, to visioning alternatives with our movements and to fostering state and federal coalitions. Our movements are broadly aligned on challenging the dominant ideology that for-profit actors can solve our housing crisis, and that the market is the best way to provide housing. Decommodification is necessary to make housing a guaranteed human right, where everyone has a safe, healthy, and stable place to call home. We are advocating for public entities to play a greater role in ensuring this reality, while advancing climate and racial justice.

Much of the work we undertake is in direct defense of tenants facing eviction, or on policy campaigns for the expansion of tenant protection policies to keep people in their homes. This work, while crucial to bring about relief and important to building power, is insufficient to meet the scale of the challenge confronting us. Only a sea change in the provision of housing will begin to address the problem: a systematic shift away from the profit motive and towards the recognition of housing as a basic human need available to all.

We recognize that the struggle for social housing is aligned with the other pillars of housing justice today: defending and improving public housing, improving tenant protections, and increasing regulation of the housing market as a whole through mechanisms like rent control. These endeavors serve as crucial steps towards building tenant power and challenging the profit-driven housing paradigm. Through advocacy for rent control, establishment of community land trusts to safeguard affordable housing, and facilitation of tenant opportunities for homeownership, organizers are bringing about material change for residents and actively disrupting the profit-driven system.



Today, social housing fights are spreading across the country, in response to decades of rollbacks and escalating economic, racial justice, and climate crises. This report tells the stories of social housing efforts underway in our communities – in the words of the organizers undertaking them – to help nurture a national movement and inspire further action.

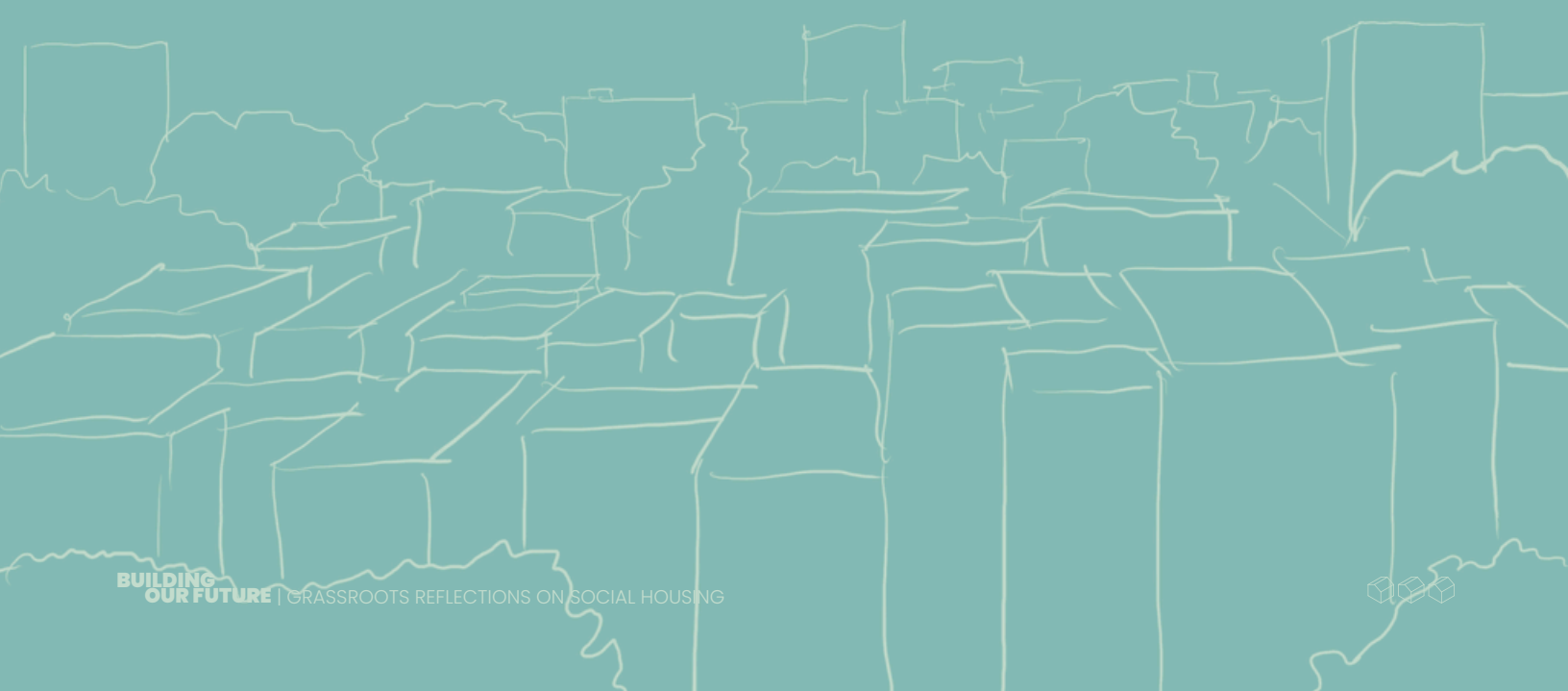
The reflections of organizers across the country demonstrates the growing social housing movements and their visions for a secure, sustainable future – to encourage linkages, learning, and collaboration. It highlights successes and challenges, diverse tactics, and concrete examples of intersections between social housing and other pressing issues from racial justice to the climate crisis to labor organizing struggles. We hope to help every community envision the social housing they need – and win it.

*This section was drafted by: Rae Huang, Shanti Singh, Rene Moya, Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Ameer Chew, Liz Ryan Murray, Jasmine Rangel, Rasheeda Phillips with contributions from many others.*



02

**VISIONING  
SOCIAL HOUSING:  
*THE COMMONS***





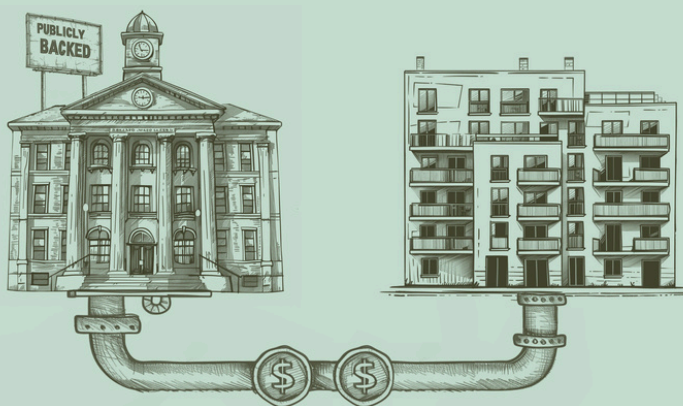
# VISIONING SOCIAL HOUSING: THE COMMONS

Nestled within the heart of our community stands The Commons, a housing complex that is a beacon of equity and efficiency. This sprawling apartment complex, envisioned and realized through a collaborative effort of residents, organizers, and lawmakers, represents a paradigm shift in housing and broader public policy.



## PUBLICLY OWNED OR UNDER DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITY CONTROL

The Commons is not owned by any corporate landlord. Instead, it sits on public land and is forever owned by residents. It can never be sold off to the highest bidder or privatized, protecting residents from rent increases and eviction.



## DEMOCRATICALLY RUN

At The Commons, decision-making power rests firmly in the hands of its residents. Through regular community meetings and a participatory governance structure, tenants have a direct say in matters concerning management, maintenance, updates, and community initiatives. Every voice is heard, and tenants, through collective bargaining rights, can raise their concerns collectively, ensuring that the needs of all residents are addressed with commitments to equity and transparency. In fact, it was the Tenant Union that helped lead the campaign to successfully pressure local government to finance and create The Commons!



## PUBLICLY FINANCED & PUBLICLY BACKED

The Commons is not beholden to profit-driven motives or corporate investors. It was made possible through generous and direct public financing initiatives, demonstrating a commitment from local, state, and federal governments to ensure affordable housing became a public good. This funding ensures that rents remain stable and affordable, safeguarding the community against the volatility of the market. Much of the financing comes from taxing the rich, as well as taxes that penalize abusive corporate landlords or Wall Street investors who speculate on housing.



# VISIONING SOCIAL HOUSING: THE COMMONS

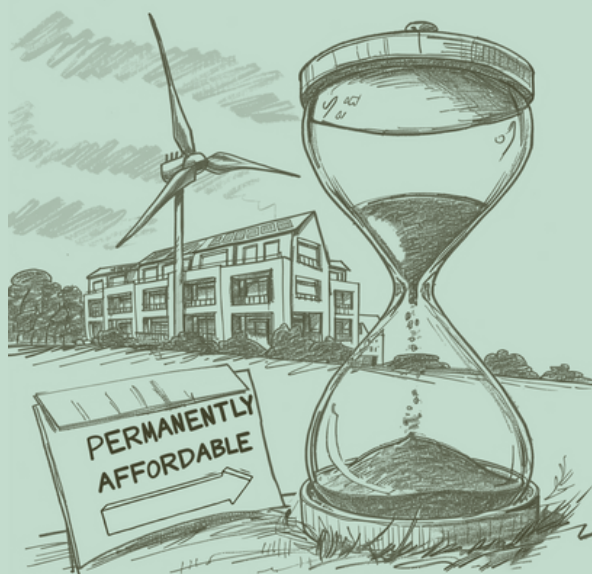


## DEEPLY AFFORDABLE, INCLUSIVE, & SUPPORTIVE

All housing at The Commons is affordable, with rents capped at 30% of income. The Commons includes a diversity of households who are all thriving: single parents, immigrants, elderly, people who were unhoused, people who were formerly incarcerated. It includes moderate income households – but The Commons is deeply affordable to the poorest as well. And reflecting the needs of our town, most residents of The Commons would otherwise be among the extremely low-income people most marginalized and excluded by for-profit housing. Inclusivity and accessibility is celebrated and intentional at The Commons, both in its design and its demographics. The complex boasts a diverse range of housing options, from cozy studio apartments to spacious family homes, catering to individuals and families of different sizes. To meet everyone’s needs, The Commons includes on-site services, counseling, childcare, schools, a community healthcare clinic, a grocery cooperative, gardens, a park with exercise areas, and other cooperative cafes and businesses. It’s a vibrant and inclusive community where residents from all walks of life can thrive together.

## PERMANENTLY AFFORDABLE

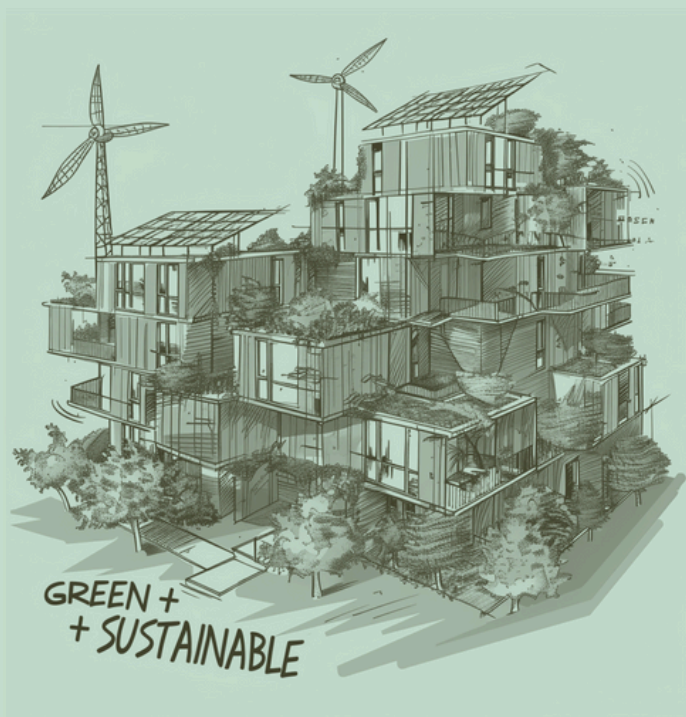
Affordability is not just a temporary measure at The Commons; it's a fundamental and ingrained principle. Through innovative financing mechanisms, rents are kept permanently affordable for everyone, ensuring that current and future generations can access safe and stable housing without fear of displacement.



# VISIONING SOCIAL HOUSING: THE COMMONS

## GREEN & SUSTAINABLE

The Commons is more than just a place to live; it's a commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainability. The Commons was actually created by renovating and rehabilitating an apartment complex, which the town took over from a corporate landlord who owned too many properties, which it kept in horrible shape. The tenants organized against their bad conditions, to have ownership transferred to their Tenant Union itself. The renovation process quickly created truly affordable housing in a more green and sustainable way than new construction. From energy-efficient building materials to community gardens and green spaces, every aspect of the complex is designed with the planet in mind. Energy efficiency also lowers heating, cooling, and utility costs. Residents take pride in their role as caretakers of the environment, implementing eco-friendly practices that reduce their carbon footprint and promote a healthier future for all.



## ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY & BELONGING

The Commons is an example of housing that furthers racial justice and belonging. The Commons is home to many residents of color and centers their needs. Nearby to a wealth of public services and convenient transportation infrastructure, The Commons was sited to counter the neglect that the town's communities of color have historically suffered; its financing, through taxing the rich, advances wealth redistribution. Through cooperative businesses on site, permanent affordability, and community control, The Commons enables Black and Brown residents to build and retain intergenerational and community wealth, not fall prey to predatory lenders and foreclosure. With residents hailing from a multitude of cultural backgrounds and ethnicities, the complex serves as a microcosm of our richly diverse community. Through intentional outreach, anti-racist practices, and cultural programs, The Commons actively works to dismantle systemic barriers and advance racial equity and justice within its walls and beyond.

# VISIONING SOCIAL HOUSING: THE COMMONS

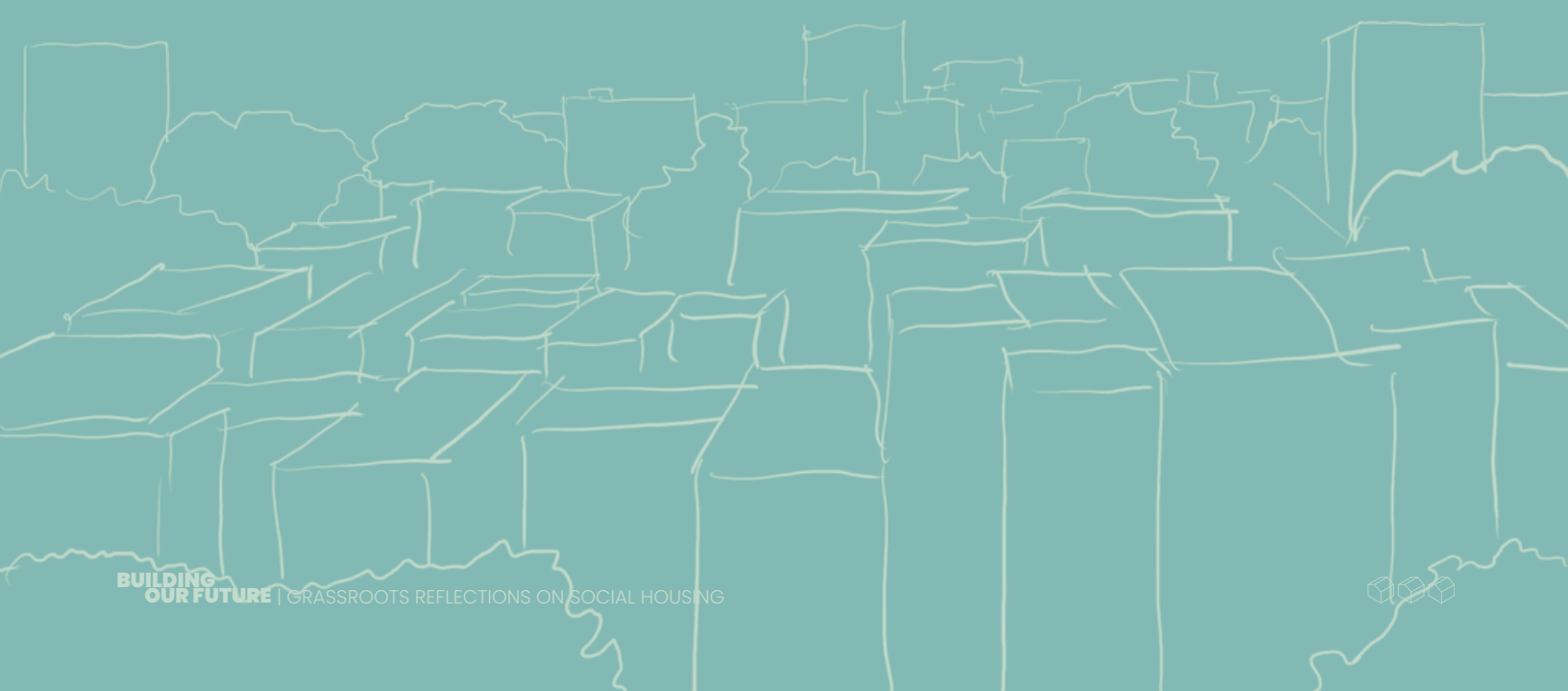


The Commons is more than just a housing complex; it's a vision of what's possible when communities come together to prioritize people over profit, sustainability over exploitation, and equity over inequality.

It serves as a shining example of how social housing can not only provide shelter but also pave the way towards a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future for all.

03

# REFLECTIONS FROM THE GRASSROOTS



# REFLECTIONS FROM THE GRASSROOTS: SOCIAL HOUSING STRUGGLES AROUND THE COUNTRY

The following section captures a set of grassroots reflections on the housing commodification crisis in communities across the nation, and the ways organized people are translating a transformative vision of social housing into campaigns that are central to addressing this crisis. Hearing from grassroots organizers is essential for understanding the state—and the true opportunities—of organizing for social housing.

Through a mix of interviews and written answers to prompts and survey questions, these reflections highlight the voices, experiences, challenges, and successes of frontline activists, who are shaping the landscape of social housing. We asked organizers, researchers, and policy advocates in a range of jurisdictions (local, state, and national) and types of institutions (base-building, coalitional) to provide background on their organizations and the housing context in which they are organizing, as well as any specifics on past and current campaigns being waged to advance social housing. We also asked groups what work is on the horizon and upcoming that they thought important and interesting to share.

The groups highlighted here are powerful examples of the type of work happening and needed to chart a path to housing justice, but they do not represent the full breadth of social housing organizing happening in the United States. As the reflections make clear, groups vary in their progress with social housing campaigns and are experimenting with different tactics and emerging models. What ties these groups together is their clear commitment to putting into practice the vision of housing as a fundamental human right and one that is no longer subject to private profiteering and exploitation.



\*not all social housing campaigns are represented in this map, just the ones that participated in this project

# LOCAL



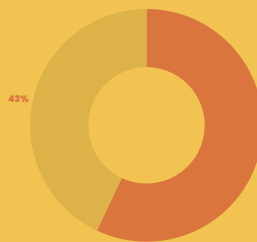


## BAY AREA, CALIFORNIA

### BACKGROUND

The nine-county San Francisco Bay Area has a well-deserved reputation as one of the United States' most unaffordable places to live: no one making under \$64,000 a year can afford median rent in any Bay Area county, and fully half of all residents are rent-burdened. The astronomical wealth and political power of Silicon Valley does not change the fact that the Bay Area is also one of the most unequal American metro areas in terms of employment: 39% of jobs are in low-wage occupations, with workers who are not close to affording any housing, new or old, that the for-profit market has to offer.

Social housing work in the Bay Area is not just driven by the Bay's infamous affordability crisis, but more importantly by years of tenant organizing and political demands against rampant housing speculation. In Oakland, the Moms 4 Housing – a collective of formerly homeless Black women – made national headlines for occupying, and winning back, foreclosed property bought by a corporate investor and “flipper.”



**HALF OF ALL RESIDENTS IN THE BAY AREA ARE 'RENT-BURDENED'**

The Veritas Tenants Association, a citywide union of tenants of San Francisco's largest landlord (Veritas Investments), engaged in a successful debt strike during the COVID pandemic, and has repeatedly campaigned for the City of San Francisco to acquire at-risk, rent-controlled properties put on sale by Veritas.

Tenant organizing has helped to build the Bay Area's nascent ecosystem of social housing models, especially community land trusts (CLT) such as the San Francisco CLT, the Bay Area CLT, the Northern California LT, the Oakland CLT, RichmondLAND, the South Bay CLT, the indigenous Sogorea Te' Land Trust, and the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative.





Eleven Bay Area cities (San Francisco, San José, Oakland, Berkeley, Richmond, Fairfax, Antioch, East Palo Alto, Hayward, Los Gatos, Mountain View) currently have rent control policies, and city-by-city rent control campaigns have grown rapidly in the past decade. Rent control is curtailed by state laws, like the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act (1995) and the Ellis Act (1986), that incentivize landlords to speculate on and evict rent-controlled tenants, making rent-controlled housing a frequent site of organizing and demands for social housing acquisition and decommodification.

### **CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON**

Municipal ballot initiatives are extremely common in California cities due to the state's longtime historical reliance on decentralized direct democracy, and Bay Area social housing efforts have often been waged at the ballot box. In 2020, Propositions I and K passed in San Francisco, respectively enacting a transfer tax to fund social housing and authorizing 10,000 units of social housing, including municipally-owned housing. In 2022, Oakland's Measure Q issued a similar authorization for 13,000 units, as did the city of South San Francisco's Measure AA, and the successful Measure ULA transfer tax in Los Angeles emulated San Francisco's Prop I to fund social housing. In 2021, city councilmembers in Berkeley approved an exploratory study on "Vienna-style" mixed-income, municipally owned housing.

All of these ballot efforts have been driven by tenant and housing justice organizations and affiliated electeds, in coalition with community groups and (parts of) organized labor, and in the face of overwhelming real estate industry opposition. As with local rent control campaigns, local social housing campaigns are learning from, and improving upon, ballot efforts from other cities.

In San Francisco, Proposition I established the Housing Stability Fund Oversight Board, a city body of tenants, tenant organizers, affordable housing financing experts, and labor unions, to annually recommend public expenditures for social housing to the City. That policy body has functioned as a public space to shape social housing demands from the short-term to long-term, including critical upgrades to single-room occupancy (SRO) housing for low-income and disabled tenants, upgrades to nonprofit-owned and public housing, land-banking for subsidized housing, funding for community land trusts and new co-operative ownership models, and studies to explore a fully municipal mixed-income production model. Unfortunately, Prop I was not passed as dedicated funding due to an obscure legal technicality, and thus, some of the revenue has been repurposed by San Francisco's real estate-backed mayoral administration toward other spending priorities, particularly the ballooning police budget. Nonetheless, elected officials in coalition with housing justice groups have been able to win budget concessions for many of these recommendations. In 2023, San José organizations engaged in a similar budget fight to defend agreed-upon funding commitments for housing acquisition from a mayor and city administration planning similar cuts.

Nascent coalitions, especially between housing justice and those labor unions whose workers are disproportionately impacted by high rents, are coming together around social housing across the Bay Area. In 2023, housing justice groups joined nearly every union representing workers of the University of California system to demand tenant protections like rent control, \$7 billion in UC divestment from predatory corporate landlord Blackstone, and reinvestment of those resources into social housing. Unions like SEIU 1021 (one of the Bay Area's largest) are increasingly bringing affordable housing funding to the bargaining table with public-sector employers. Tenant organizing is also taking inspiration from labor – San Francisco's Union at Home ordinance, the first of its kind, legally recognizes qualifying tenant associations' right to collectively bargain. Berkeley is considering a similar "right to organize" campaign at the ballot.



## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

Elected officials are taking notice, and the authors of state-level social housing and acquisition funding proposals in Sacramento disproportionately represent Bay Area districts. However, despite the Bay Area's reputation for progressive politics, there is plenty of institutional hostility to social housing in one of the world's richest economies, home to Silicon Valley, a deep-pocketed real estate industry, and a political structure that caters to both. Decades of real estate-backed state propositions and laws, like Proposition 13 (1978), the "Gann limit" (1979) and Proposition 218 (1996), make it extremely difficult to pass tax initiatives at the local ballot or benefit from state tax revenue even in surplus years. Article 34 of the California Constitution (1950), pushed by real estate interests during the peak of the redlining era, mandates a local vote for any "low cost" housing that is majority publicly-funded. As with rent control, harmful state-level policies heavily constrain efforts to fund social housing.

Social housing politics in the Bay, and in California, have been driven by the on-the-ground demands of tenant (and increasingly, labor and environmental justice) movements. However, the Bay Area still lacks a shared understanding of social housing, as well as a more permanent political coalition to advance it. Most public housing in the Bay Area has long been privatized by nonprofit owners, and nearly half of Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) homes are owned by profit-seeking actors. There is skepticism among some parts of the affordable housing sector and among elected officials in reviving municipal and state-owned housing models.

Municipal electoral and local budget strategies have their limitations: local funds can be diverted away from social housing each year, and can't make up for the lack of state (and federal) funding. The 7.8 million residents of the nine-county Bay Area are fragmented into 100 separate municipalities, each with their own budgets and decision-makers, both elected and unelected. The Bay Area Housing Finance Authority (BAHFA), created in 2019 by state legislators to un-silo housing policies, is considering putting a multi-billion dollar regional bond for subsidized housing to voters, but organizing and advocacy is necessary to make social housing models part of the conversation. Regional coalition-building around social housing is in a very early phase, but building regional networks of tenant organizing, labor organizing, environmental justice organizing, and others can leverage existing on-the-ground fights into collective demands for permanently affordable, permanently decommodified social housing.

**This reflection was drafted by Shanti Singh of Tenants Together, with contributions from dozens of housing rights organizations across the Bay Area.**





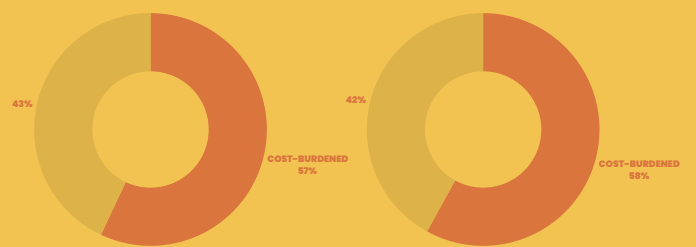
# INLAND EMPIRE, CALIFORNIA

## BACKGROUND

In California, over the past two decades, home costs have risen significantly faster than household incomes. Even with housing price volatility related to the foreclosure crisis and Great Recession, house values in the state increased by roughly 180 percent between 2000 and 2019. In contrast, median household incomes in California increased by only about 23 percent over the same time period. The mismatch between housing costs and incomes leads to massive burdens for families across the state.

Indeed, about 39.5 percent of California households in 2019 met HUD's definition of severely housing cost burdened, paying more than 30 percent of their household income on housing. The Inland Empire also has housing costs that exceed the national average. In Riverside and San Bernardino counties, the percentages of cost-burdened renter households is 58.9% and 56.8% respectively—higher than the national average and many coastal areas in California.

Inland Equity Partnership (“IEP”) is an anti-poverty coalition of nonprofits, unions and other base building groups who are advocating for social service programs and on state budget policy and issues affecting low-income people. Inland Equity Community Land Trust (“IECLT”) is a base building organization, working to organize renters into renter unions. As the region saw historic rent increases, IECLT formed to develop and advocate for permanently affordable housing.



**IN RIVERSIDE COUNTY THE PERCENTAGE OF COST-BURDENED RENTER HOUSEHOLDS IS 59%**

**IN SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY IT IS 57%**



## CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

Organizers in the Inland Empire see social housing as a long-term project to establish public housing. However, in order to force the government to invest in building housing, and therefore make social housing a reality, a much larger grassroots movement is needed. But when considering examples around the world, from Vienna to Venezuela, we believe this vision is possible.

IECLT primarily works with municipalities and local governments to found community land trusts. Neighborhood Partnership Housing Services was the first nonprofit to establish a land trust in the IE. IECLT is building four homes in the City of Adelanto that will be IECLT's first CLT. By starting small with projects like this one, IECLT will spread the idea of community land trusts as a model of affordable housing, turning each victory into momentum for new efforts.

IECLT's work reflects the diversity and creativity of social housing policies, and has successfully advocated for a number of creative solutions to the housing crisis that meet different municipalities where they are politically. In Palm Springs, for instance, IE-CLT advocated for and helped pass a hotel bed tax that finances a housing trust fund. This tax takes advantage of astronomical B&B pricing during Coachella, which has driven up rental prices throughout the city, and will help provide affordable housing for residents.

In Jurupa Valley, another Inland Empire city, organizers passed an [inclusionary housing ordinance](#) requiring new developments to include at least seven percent affordable units. Developers that do not comply may choose to pay an in-lieu fee, which also finances an affordable housing fund. The ordinance, passed in 2022, has already generated over \$6 million.

## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

IECLT is hoping to develop a rent-to-own housing strategy as a way to capture Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) subsidies into a similar equity sharing agreement. This subsidy retention would help maintain Section 8 resources to provide prolonged benefits in the community. Under a typical voucher model, rent subsidies go directly to a landlord, who may live far away and have no connection to the community, and the funds disappear from the local community. Conversely, dollars used to subsidize rent-to-own allows tenants to build up equity based on the share they pay, while the subsidy goes into the walls of the house or the land it sits on, making it permanently affordable and keeping dollars in the community.

Another important policy measure that organizers in the Inland Empire are pursuing is [TOPA/COPA](#) – the model tenant opportunity to purchase and community opportunity to purchase acts. These measures give tenants a right of first refusal in the sale of their units, meaning that owners must offer them the sale before going to other buyers. TOPA/COPA makes it possible for community members to convert existing housing into cooperatives, taking it off the speculative market. Joining organizers across the state of California, IECLT is pressing Riverside and San Bernardino counties and the cities of Redlands and Palm Springs to adopt TOPA/COPA.

Organizers have long been fighting for the repeal of crime-free housing ordinances in a number of Inland Empire municipalities. These ordinances, which permit or require eviction following a tenant's arrest, proliferated over the past three decades, often in areas seeing an increase of Black residents. They have been used by cities to deepen and entrench residential segregation and led to an 21.2% average increase in eviction rates in cities where they have passed, according to [a Rand Corp. study](#). They also contribute to the disproportionate rates of homelessness among Black people and communities of color in California, making enforcement of the [new law repealing these ordinances](#) a continued priority for IECLT.

While advocating for policy change at the local level, IECLT is also organizing tenants unions throughout the region. Working with a number of coalition partners, from DSA to local unions and racial justice groups, they have begun campaigns against several regional slumlords.



*Poor people live in houses all over the world, why not here?*

**JEFF GREEN**  
**INLAND EQUITY COMMUNITY LAND TRUST**

*This reflection was drafted by Jeff Green and Maribel Nunez of the Inland Equity Partnership.*





## KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

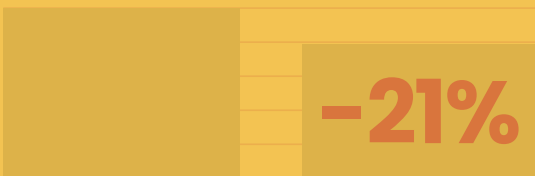
### BACKGROUND

KC Tenants is a citywide tenant union, an organization led by a multigenerational, multiracial, anti-racist base of poor and working class tenants in Kansas City, Missouri. KC Tenants organizes to ensure that everyone in Kansas City has a safe, accessible, and truly affordable home. Standing at over 10,000 tenants members, we have developed 10 site-based unions, and two neighborhood unions, with two more currently developing. Rents across Kansas City have been skyrocketing over the last several years, and there is a concurrent housing shortage for homeowners alike.

### CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

In the last four years we have built a base of over 10,000 tenants and bank tenants (home owners) and organized to win nationally-recognized tenant protections including a Tenants Bill of Rights, Tenants Right to Counsel, guaranteeing every tenant a free attorney in eviction court, and a \$50 million bond to support truly affordable housing.

In the summer of 2023, our sibling organization, KC Tenants Power, elected four tenant champions to City Council. The decision to get involved in the 2023 municipal election came from our collective understanding that it isn't good enough to win good policy without ensuring that policy is effectively implemented. We believe that the people closest to the problem are closest to the solution and should be involved in the process of making decisions about the things that shape their lives.



**BETWEEN 2010 AND 2021, THE KANSAS CITY'S MIDTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD'S BLACK POPULATION DECREASED BY 21% DUE TO UNAFFORDABILITY**



## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

At KC Tenants, our North Star is municipal social housing: housing delivered as a public good, off the private market, democratically controlled by the tenants who live in it, and permanently affordable. It is housing that is delivered as infrastructure by the government, as roads or bridges are consistently reinvested in for the public good.

There are significant prospects for municipal social housing becoming a reality in the near future. As rents in Kansas City skyrocket and poverty is exacerbated, the housing crisis is apparent to people across Kansas City and the country. When knocking doors to ask residents about how they want to see public dollars used they are overwhelmingly naming affordable housing. The people of Kansas City are clear about what we need and each day become more grounded in the belief that suffering is not inevitable. A world where we are all housed is possible—and it isn't far away.

Remaining questions include “where will money for social housing come from?” and “what will the governance structure of a municipal social housing system be?” KC Tenants fundamentally believe in a co-governance process for social housing led by their base, especially by creating neighborhood tenant unions that have more direct links with local communities. In the coming months, we will be talking to our neighbors, developing a feasibility study, and publicly offering answers to how we see this vision realized in our city.

Potential obstacles and forces arrayed against social housing include the ever-present force of real estate money and other profiteering institutions, which donate to political campaigns and exert undue influence over the local political system. The state of Missouri is run by a conservative state government that often threatens to pre-empt progressive laws proposed in Kansas City—indeed, legislation was recently introduced in an attempt to overturn Kansas City's ban on source of income discrimination, and rent control is already outlawed at the state level. KC Tenants see building nationwide tenant power as an important avenue towards reigning in state governments hostile to tenants' interests.

We have been inspired by other movements and their successes and also hope that advancements elsewhere will make wins in KC that lead towards big demands like municipal social housing and rent control easier – showing that winning is possible even in states run by politicians who are extremely hostile to tenants' rights and public intervention in housing.



**KC TENANTS**



## LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

### BACKGROUND

Following many years of crisis-centered organizing, and spurred by the realization that local government would never provide enough housing to meet needs, tenants in Los Angeles began looking towards a more liberatory vision of social housing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizing efforts in LA include a successful ballot measure campaign to create a new revenue source for social housing, eminent domain of a building with affordable units, a diverse ecosystem of community land trusts, and a new training hub for tenant-management of buildings.

One of the major forces for social housing in LA is ACT-LA, a coalition founded in 2011 after a series of community assemblies to address displacement of low-income families from Los Angeles's transit-rich neighborhoods.

### CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

In 2019, a network of tenant power and community ownership organizations, as well as their housing justice allies, came together to form the LA Housing Movement Lab. This network was designed to create spaces for grassroots orgs and coalitions to step out of day-to-day campaign and crisis mode, and build a collective long-term vision for the housing justice movement in Los Angeles. In this space, member organizations built long-term movement goals to drive their collective vision forward, and named decommodification of land and housing as a central long-term strategy for the LA Housing Justice Movement. As one of the leading groups in the Movement Lab, ACT-LA began to move this work forward by looking to social housing as a pathway to their goal of building an LA where all people have access to quality jobs, affordable housing, necessary social services, ample transportation options, and a voice in decision-making.





Inspired by social housing models in Vienna, Singapore, Berlin, Uruguay and Copenhagen, as well as cooperatives and community land trusts, ACT-LA convened its members and partners to design models for social housing in the context of Los Angeles. A turning point came in 2021-2022, when ACT-LA co-chaired the United to House LA (UHLA) ballot measure coalition. UHLA brought together over 200 organizations including affordable housing developers, homeless services providers, labor unions, and more. The campaign covered a wide scope of housing-related funding needs, so it required a wide range of organizations to advocate for its passage. The support of labor unions was particularly crucial. The coalition, through organizing and voter engagement, collected signatures to place a citizens initiative on the ballot, which required a simple majority of voters to pass.

The ballot measure, which passed in November 2022, establishes a one-time tax on sales of properties worth more than \$5 million, which funds a combination of affordable housing and homelessness prevention.

With hundreds of millions in estimated revenue expected per year (dependent on sales in any given year), Measure ULA will be the largest and most comprehensive permanent source of local housing and homelessness prevention funding the City of Los Angeles has ever had, and one of the largest funds for housing/homelessness programs nationally to build the infrastructure and to scale the models of progressive housing solutions. Measure ULA will fund eleven program areas; 22.5-25% of the funding will be earmarked for “Alternative Models for Permanent Affordable Housing”, which must be spent on housing aligned with organizers’ social housing vision and an additional 10% of funds for “Acquisition and Rehabilitation of Affordable Housing” which organizers also see as part of the new social housing program. Other funds in ULA are set aside for tenant ownership capacity building, funds which organizers are advocating be used to develop an LA Housing Training Hub.



This Hub would educate tenants and prepare them to manage or own their own housing/buildings. Following the model of the Urban Homestead Assistance Board in New York and other cooperative models, the training hub would support tenant governance structures, resident councils, budgeting, and more for community-managed buildings. The Hub would also provide training to affordable housing developers, owners and property managers, to support their enhanced collaboration with tenants and resident-owners. The homelessness prevention programs fund rental assistance, eviction defense, anti-harassment, income support for seniors and people with disabilities, support for tenant education, and more. ACT-LA is continuing to lead the social housing campaign and working with partners to establish the LA Housing Training Hub.

As noted above, Measure ULA earmarked funds for acquisition and rehabilitation of occupied properties, a provision that was written to accelerate housing preservation and tenant ownership strategies being advanced currently by LA’s community land trusts (CLTs). Los Angeles already has a rich ecosystem of CLTs.

In 2020, the five established CLTs in LA -- all BIPOC-led and movement-driven organizations -- formed the Los Angeles Community Land Trust Coalition. Operating as an unincorporated association with an established governance structure and protocols for collaboration, the original five CLTs forming the coalition are T.R.U.S.T. South LA, Fideicomiso Comunitario Tierra Libre, El Sereno CLT, Beverly Vermont CLT, and Liberty CLT. Each has its own unique history, purpose, and geographic focus, but a common challenge has been overcoming racial and class-based distrust of renters and convincing elected leaders and agency staff that tenants can manage properties as community owners. The LA CLT Coalition has collaborated to raise philanthropic resources, develop partnerships with mission-aligned Community Development Corporations, secure technical and legal assistance, develop and advocate for policies and funding, and implement acquisition programs, including the LA County CLT Partnership Program authored by Supervisor Hilda Solis.



## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

The CLT Coalition is working on a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act campaign at the county level, giving tenants a right of first refusal on the sale of properties they occupy. Because Los Angeles County only has five supervisors, in contrast to the complicated politics of Los Angeles City Council, organizers have adopted a strategy of working first to establish TOPA within unincorporated LA County before advancing this effort with interested LA City Councilmembers who have expressed an interest in advancing the policy.

Efforts to secure ongoing affordable housing in LA overlap significantly with organizing to preserve communities and neighborhoods facing gentrification or displacement. To take one example, Hillside Villa is a 124 unit apartment building in Chinatown, one of the lowest income neighborhoods in Los Angeles. When the building's affordability restrictions expired, the landlord threatened to raise rents up to 200%-300%. Tenants organized and successfully pressured the city to acquire the building through eminent domain. While the deal is not yet finalized, organizers are already working on turning the building into a tenant-owned or -managed building, with the land potentially held by the emerging Los Angeles Chinatown CLT. If Hillside Villas is successful in using eminent domain, this would be a historic win and could create momentum for the city to use eminent domain as a land acquisition strategy for social housing.

Similarly, in Crenshaw, a historically Black area in South Central Los Angeles, the Liberty Ecosystem, which includes Liberty CLT, is building a sustainable, sovereign Black-owned economy. The Ecosystem is made up of 7 distinct initiatives, some of which have been organizing in the neighborhood for decades. This organizing extends beyond housing to include community financial strategies, commercial and community spaces, and business development. For instance, Liberty Ecosystem has acquired and is developing additional community spaces in

Crenshaw, improving access to capital including home repair loans, and increasing subway service in the community. This work has to be community-led because government-provided resources are rarely accessible to Crenshaw residents. For instance, Liberty Ecosystem and the Liberty CLT are building alternatives to affordable housing, which discriminates based on criminal history and forces tenants to stay below a certain income threshold in order to maintain housing stability.

Across LA, tenants are coming together around a shared vision of collectively-owned and -managed housing that is permanently affordable, allowing residents to continue living in their own communities, especially historically marginalized areas of LA. With the passage of ULA, new funds have opened up to support tenants in this work. Already, the tax measure has raised over 200 million dollars. As champions for social housing implementation, ACT-LA has been working to identify where social housing could be built, what policy changes are needed within the City of LA, as well as building capacity with aligned developers and CBOs to help them understand how to develop community controlled housing. For example, as a part of this process, they are working with Metro's housing initiative, which is seeking to build 10,000 new affordable housing units on Metro owned land by 2031. .

In addition to building the capacities of tenants, developers, and CBOs to move social housing forward, ACT-LA and the UHLA Coalition are engaged in daily work to make sure that implementation by and with the City of LA remains grounded in community priorities. On top of all of this, the UHLA Coalition is also working to defend the measure from lawsuits and ballot measures that would repeal the tax measure coming from conservative big capital actors such as the California Business Roundtable and the Apartment Association of Greater Los Angeles. ACT-LA and ULA are showing us that the passing of strong policy is just the beginning of the fight, and to see a true transformation in our housing system, we need to deeply resource the housing justice movement at many levels.





## SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

### BACKGROUND

Seattle is facing a housing crisis, with more than 13,000 people in the county experiencing homelessness amid a shortage of nearly 30,000 affordable units. The House Our Neighbors Coalition in Seattle initially formed in 2021 to oppose Charter Amendment 29, which would have made sweeps of homeless encampments the cornerstone of housing policy for the city. After it was defeated, HON proposed our solution to the homelessness and housing crisis through a citywide ballot initiative: social housing. After passing I-135, which created Seattle's Social Housing Developer, House Our Neighbors launched as an independent 501c3 and 501c4 organization to advance social housing, climate action, and connected communities.

### CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

In February 2023, House Our Neighbors I-135, pursued a ballot initiative for social housing. The biggest goal of the social housing initiative was to create housing as a public good. In Seattle, the public housing authority is very limited and primarily operates by issuing vouchers, rather than actually owning and maintaining properties.

**13,000**

IN SEATTLE COUNTY ARE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Nonprofits fortunately provide some level of affordable housing to people at 60% of the Area Median Income ("AMI") and below, but major gaps for others still under the AMI remain. Meanwhile, every year, the private market becomes less attainable to the majority of people in Seattle, especially as more and more people working in tech with higher incomes move to the city. This has created a huge gap of housing need, especially for working class people whose income is nowhere near that of highly compensated tech professionals, corporate executives, and those with generational wealth. And, even with nonprofit development, there's a gap in the extremely low income housing provision as well. Social housing would create an opportunity for working people to have access to affordable housing regardless of their income and their profession.



Inspired by examples from Vienna and Montgomery County, Maryland as well as conversations with community organizations and currently or formerly unhoused individuals, House Our Neighbors came together around a social housing model.

By proposing a ballot initiative rather than working through the traditional legislative process, House Our Neighbors was able to pursue a bolder, more creative policy than Seattle city councilors would have supported. I-135 establishes a new public agency, the Seattle Social Housing Developer (SSHD) under Washington state's Public Development Authority law, which has also housed major successful projects such as the Pike Place Market. The SSHD is tasked with providing housing for people across the income spectrum that is permanently affordable and publicly owned in perpetuity. Properties developed by the SSHD are financed through a bonding mechanism and must also be permanently affordable, with rents capped at 30% of a household's income, at any income level, while still prioritizing lower income tiers. While there is not guaranteed revenue for operating costs for the SSHD, we are currently running a funding initiative campaign to address this very problem. The social housing ballot initiative mandates that the SSHD meet passive house standards for green development, as well as employ restorative justice conflict resolution practices in place of eviction in cases of conflict between neighbors.

The initiative also funnels land into the SSHD by requiring the city council to conduct a feasibility study before any sale or gift of public lands to non-public use to see whether the land should be given to the SHD. This process is meant to change the common practice in Seattle, like many U.S. cities, of selling off prime public land to private development or granting it to nonprofits who often also eventually sell the land to private actors.

Finally, the initiative ensures resident voices in the decision-making process of the SSHD by requiring that seven members of the thirteen-member board be residents of the housing maintained by the developer. This makes it the first housing developer of any kind that has a majority of residents running the board.

# 30,000

THE SHORTAGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING  
UNITES IN THE COUNTY

Ultimately, the campaign to pass the social housing initiative was extremely popular and very successful. The core coalition was made up of organizers within the Seattle housing policy space, community organizations, abolitionists, tech workers, urbanists, safe street advocates, and community members who do mutual aid work on weekends, folks who take action when the city performs encampment sweeps and help residents move or resist displacement, and tenant organizing groups. They quickly found common cause with environmental groups including 350 Seattle and Puget Sound Sage, as well as labor unions. In order to pass the initiative, they conducted tabling and gathered over 30,000 signatures by talking to the public about what social housing is and what it means for residents of the city. Organizers knocked doors and found that when people heard about the initiative, it was very well-received. This hard work led renters and community members to turn out in large numbers to vote for and ultimately pass the initiative in February 2023 with a 14 point margin.

The chief opposition to the campaign came from nonprofit affordable housing developers that provide housing only to the lowest income. These organizations claimed that social housing was a distraction, would undermine the legitimacy of nonprofit housing, and would take resources from groups currently providing housing, but ultimately did not formally oppose the bill. House Our Neighbors successfully emphasized that the bonding mechanism provides the SSHD its own independent revenue stream, and would not divest resources from nonprofit housing.

## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

Passing the initiative was not the end of the work for the coalition. Recognizing the need for sustained political action, education, and momentum around social housing, the HON coalition has now formed a 501c3 and 501c4 organization. We are hosting quarterly grassroots calls with groups across the country working to create social housing in their jurisdictions. We are also currently gathering signatures for Initiative 137, which would pass a 5% excess compensation payroll tax on employers who compensate individuals over \$1 million to fund the Seattle Social Housing Developer created through I-135.

This funding source will provide the SSHD with operational and capital funds and revenue to bond on in the future. We are also working on providing social housing land use code benefits, such as not having to go through onerous design review processes and streamlined permitting.

We are also working in coalition with non-profit housing providers to ensure that our city's next comprehensive plan update allows for more density across the city so that affordable and social housing have more ability to cool the private market and provide housing for a broad section of residents.



*The housing crisis is now and people are struggling now. We didn't wanna wait five or 10 years to get something passed through the legislature.*

**TIFFANI MCCOY**  
**HON POLICY AND ADVOCACY DIRECTOR**

*This reflection was developed by Tiffani McCoy, Policy & Advocacy Director of House Our Neighbors, with contributions from House Our Neighbors Advisory Committee Members.*



*I don't think that the rent burden that people are facing in Seattle is unique. I think that renters across the country are facing a lot of struggles with their housing stability. I think that an organized group that was able to excite renters about this would be able to be successful in a lot of places.*

**JEFF PAUL**  
**HON ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBER**





## HOUSTON, DALLAS, SAN ANTONIO TEXAS

### BACKGROUND

The Texas Organizing Project (TOP) is a membership-based organization of low-income Black and brown Texans organizing across the state. In Houston, TOP started their housing campaign after Hurricane Harvey in 2017 to advocate for improved access to FEMA funding for members who were homeowners. Initially, TOP believed that because FEMA was assisting landlords, tenants would not be hit as hard by the aftermath of the hurricane. However, realizing that landlords were receiving FEMA money and refraining from using those funds for needed repairs, TOP turned their attention towards organizing renters. Later, during the pandemic, TOP began organizing around eviction prevention. As they canvassed buildings, however, it became clear that renters weren't just concerned about avoiding eviction – they were demanding improved living conditions.

At that point, their organizing goal shifted to preventing evictions and ensuring the quality of housing.



**INCREASE OF EVICTION FILINGS HOUSTON METRO AREA SAW IN 2023 – A HISTORIC HIGH.**

TOP had some small victories organizing against small landlords, but after realizing that corporations drive the market prices up and carry a lot of weight politically, they shifted to target large corporate landowners.

TOP operates in a state with laws that are very hostile to tenants and whose state legislature often moves to preempt the wins we are able to get at a local level. Residents of Houston are facing unprecedented levels of hostility, including some of the biggest spikes in eviction nationwide following the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, [according to a recent study](#), the Houston metro area has seen 42% more eviction filings in 2023 than a typical year before the pandemic — a historic high for the city.

## CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

TOP uses two main tools to achieve their goals: organizing renters to build a base, and endorsing and supporting local candidates. TOP organizes building-by-building, targeting properties with low-income communities of color, high rates of eviction, and corporate landlords. On the doors and in tenant meetings, conversations center around the rising rent, need for improvements in properties, and connecting tenant issues to challenges at the local, state, and national level. This tactic has allowed TOP to build a powerful base of tenant members. To bridge our people power and political strategies, TOP is interested in asking candidates whether they accept political contributions from real estate – a major force in Texas politics – and using that information to decide which candidates they will support, and who they believe will demonstrate a commitment to tenants..

Through TOP's organizing, Harris County recently put in place a Tenant Protection Policy that applies to subsidized affordable housing which receive county funds. The policy recognizes tenants' right to organize, expands access of people with felony convictions to subsidized housing, and provides just cause eviction protections, improved habitability enforcement, and protection against source of income discrimination.

While this policy applies to current forms of subsidized housing that are not permanently affordable social housing, TOP sees it as a victory on the pathway to the kind of tenant power which all tenants should enjoy; while establishing important precedent about access to affordable housing for people with records. Unfortunately the rules do not apply retroactively to buildings that have already received county money, but TOP is working on determining which buildings will come within the ordinance, and establishing a hotline for residents of those buildings to report violations. TOP is optimistic that the right to organize will allow them to move faster to organize buildings and will make tenants, especially those who are undocumented, less afraid of retaliation.

Over the past year, TOP has organized tenants in LIHTC properties invested in by Blackstone and other corporate landlords, and is now involved in organizing LIHTC tenants in Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas Counties. Tenants are organizing to negotiate directly with landlords on repairs and habitability concerns, and to avoid eviction.

Additionally, TOP constantly looks for opportunities to win more public funding from local and county governments for affordable housing, with tenant protections as a requirement. TOP supported the successful passage of a housing bond in San Antonio to fund construction and preservation of deeply affordable housing, including fighting for funds to preserve and repair existing public housing. Meanwhile, TOP has been supportive of Harris County's efforts to use American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) funds to support community land trusts (CLTs). In 2023, the County decided to spend \$15 million in ARPA funds to buy over 100 single-family homes for the county's CLT, to provide and preserve long-term affordable housing. TOP has also met with the County about the possibility of using ARPA funds to rehabilitate and move rental units into the CLT, as well as about a bill of rights for residents in these homes.

TOP continues to advance tenant protections, successfully increasing the number of housing inspectors from two to eight in Harris County, and is working on ensuring that inspections are thorough and effective at regulating housing conditions.



## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

TOP is continuing to strengthen its tenant organizing and building the base of TOP's members who know that our current housing model isn't working. For instance, a tenant in one of the LIHTCs that TOP is organizing shared, if she won the lottery and had the money to buy and own her building – then the tenants could run it, and they would be more fair, more responsive, and more accountable than the current management. They would work with people behind in rent, and not charge excessive fees. Tenants know what the solutions are, and are dreaming about owning and running their own properties.

Ultimately, TOP is organizing towards a world in which everyone has access to safe, healthy, and affordable housing where they and their families can thrive, and they can be secure against discrimination and poor treatment by landlords.

“

*We recognize we have to take these properties out of the speculative market completely, to solve the problems tenants are having*

**SOFIA LOPEZ,**  
**TOP'S HOUSING JUSTICE CAMPAIGN**  
**DIRECTOR**

*This reflection was developed by Sofia Lopez and Mitzi Ordoñez, Organizers with Texas Organizing Project, with contributions from Ameer Chew of the Center for Popular Democracy.*



# STATEWIDE





## CALIFORNIA

The housing crisis in California is notorious in its depth, breadth and impact. A full 28% – more than 1 in every 4 – of those counted as homeless in the U.S. are homeless in California. While every individual's pathway to homelessness is unique, there is a straight line between housing unaffordability, eviction and homelessness. A full 56% of California renters are being charged more than a third of their income on their housing, with millions of those paying more than half. For Black and Latino renters, it's even worse, with 67% of Black households and 57% of Latino households carrying a rent burden. But even those stark numbers do not tell the full story of how Californians are experiencing the housing crisis. Record rent increases are pushing people into housing that is barely habitable, over-crowded and far from people's communities and jobs before all-too-often onto the street. Our market and profit driven housing system is unsustainable and is only driving misery. Against this backdrop of urgency, a statewide social housing campaign has developed over the past six years that has won state legislation to study social housing, and is working to knit together local decommodification campaigns across the state.



**MORE THAN 1 IN EVERY 4 – OF THOSE COUNTED AS HOMELESS IN THE U.S. ARE IN CALIFORNIA.**

### BACKGROUND

Across California, local organizing has mounted campaigns to decommodify housing, some described in other sections of this report. The aim of the Housing Now! Social Housing Campaign has been to knit those struggles together into a movement that is greater than the sum of its parts and provide “ladders of engagement” that bring residents and workers into struggle together to achieve long-term transformation of our housing system across the entire state.

The California campaign has been led by a coordinating committee composed of Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), Tenants Together, Public Advocates, the California Community Land Trust Network, PolicyLink, SAJE and Housing NOW!, and more recently adding PICO, the California Green New Deal Coalition, Power CA and California DSA.



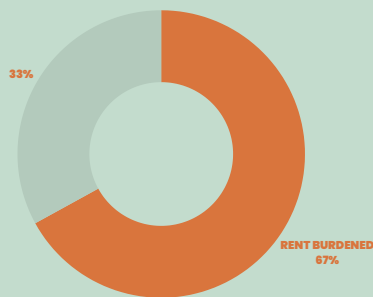
## CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

By 2023, we enacted [SB 555 \(Wahab\)](#), a social housing bill that commits the state to producing a study on the prospects for creating “a robust sector of social housing that offers below-market rents affordable to households of all income levels who are unable to afford market rents and that is permanently shielded from the speculative market.”

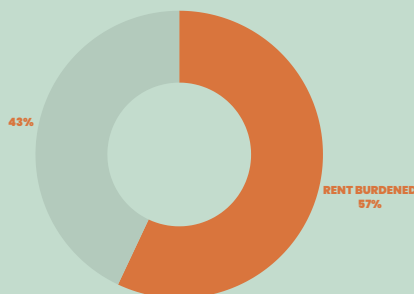
In its early days, the working group tackled the question: What is social housing? After discussing a variety of models, including Vienna’s approach, preservation models, and the approach advocated by the People’s Policy Project, the group decided that it was premature to commit to one particular model, and instead opted for an outcome-based definition of social housing.

That definition, now [embedded in state law](#), highlights (1) ownership by a public agency, a limited-equity housing cooperative, or a mission-driven nonprofit entity for the benefit of residents and households unable to afford market rent, (2) a mix of households, from those with the lowest incomes to moderate-income households unable to afford market rent, all paying below-market rents based on their income, (3) strong protections against eviction and unaffordable rent increases, (4) permanent protection from privatization, and (5) the right of residents to participate directly and meaningfully in decision-making affecting the operation and management of their homes.

While this definition is broad, it has limits. For instance, it does not encompass “inclusionary” affordable units in market-rate development, even if under public ownership; in fact, it does not allow any role for the market, even that of setting market-based rents. It also excludes typical LIHTC housing, which is not permanently affordable, does not accommodate a broad mix of tenant incomes, and does not limit rents (or rent increases) based on 30% of a tenant’s income. Our focus on residents not served by the speculative market emphasizes deep affordability and below-market rate rents, while including some units for middle-income families.



**67% OF BLACK HOUSEHOLDS CARRY A RENT BURDEN.**



**57% OF LATINO HOUSEHOLDS CARRY A RENT BURDEN.**

This approach, and our view that local experimentation with a variety of models is crucial to achieving social housing at scale, has put us in conflict with the YIMBY view of social housing, as reflected in several bills introduced in the state Assembly beginning in 2021. Those bills have aimed to create a state social housing authority to produce market-rate housing and some affordable units on a “revenue-neutral” basis. While we support the eventual creation of state social housing authority, we believe it will require public funding, and must focus on serving those unable to afford market rents (as does [A 9088](#), the bill proposed in New York State by Assembly member Emily Galagher.) It will also take a much more powerful movement to ensure that a state developer does not function in an unaccountable, technocratic manner, in contradiction to our principle of resident democracy.

We also diverge from the YIMBY analysis that supply and demand is at the root of the affordable housing and homelessness crises, instead believing it is rooted in financialization and speculation. Through SB 555, the state of California has now officially adopted our view: “The private housing market has failed to meet the needs of the vast majority of California residents, who are unable to afford market rents. Increasingly, housing speculation and financialization in the rental market is driving rents higher, even as new market-rate housing is produced.”

Finally, our divergence from the YIMBY approach is also a matter of strategy. We believe it will take a movement of millions of poor and working-class renters to wrest our housing from speculative control and vest it in the control of publicly- and community-accountable agencies, like cities and community land trusts. Building that diverse and powerful movement will require local organizing across the state, and broadening our coalition.

Labor was a key part of the coalition that won passage of SB 555. In a state in which the building trades are often at odds with service- and public-sector unions, our social housing bill won the support of the State Building and Construction Trades Council (which embedded our definition of social housing in a bill of their own, to tax short-term vacation rentals to fund social housing), and also of the California Labor Federation, AFSCME, SEIU, the California Federation of Teachers and UAW.

As we enter the implementation phase, we are working to engage rank-and-file union members in the campaign, alongside other organized tenants.

Local California organizing includes fights for revenue (like the campaigns discussed in this report in LA and San Francisco), and for local policies to support tenant and CLT acquisition of housing, as well as fights over surplus publicly-owned land and struggles of tenant unions against Wall Street investors and expiring LIHTC affordability covenants.

## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

As we prepare to implement last year’s legislative victory, we are working to knit together these local struggles, through a comprehensive program of political education about social housing. We are unpacking the lessons of the U.S. movement for social housing in the 1930s, including Catherine Bauer’s 1934 classic, Modern Housing, and the Labor Housing Conference that it inspired. We are also digesting the lessons of Vienna, which a cohort of our partners visited in 2022, along with six members of the state legislature.

The California campaign has also focused on new state revenue for social housing. We hope to see our acquisition and rehab fund included in a statewide bond measure in 2024. Known as the Community Anti-Displacement and Preservation Program, or CAPP, the funding would be equally available for traditional LIHTC projects and for social housing as defined in SB 555. One lesson of our work on the revenue side has been that we build alliances with nonprofit developers, rather than compete with them for scarce resources, when we find opportunities to create new funding streams that support both traditional affordable housing and social housing. (Measure ULA, discussed in another section of this report, did the same by providing a separate funding stream for each.)

*This reflection was written by Richard Marcantonio and Liz Ryan Murray of Public Advocates Inc.*





## CONNECTICUT

### BACKGROUND

The Connecticut Tenants Union (CTTU) is a democratic statewide tenant union organizing for the rights and dignity of the 1.3 million tenants and unhoused people across Connecticut. We are working together toward housing that is recognized as a public good and democratically controlled rather than traded as a commodity for profit; housing that is safe, well-maintained, and beautiful; and housing that is stable, affordable, climate-resilient, and secure for tenants. That includes organizing for green social housing for all.

In Connecticut, landlords are hiking rents at historically high rates and wages are not keeping pace, leaving tenants with few options. Last year, a minimum wage worker in Connecticut needed to work 85 hours/week to be able to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment for their family. Meanwhile, there are not enough truly affordable homes available to be able to provide stable housing for all who need it.

In our organizing at CTTU, we have seen how the power imbalance between landlords and tenants enables a sizable number of “mega-landlords” to squeeze tenants for a profit, ignore maintenance needs, and restrict the supply of permanently affordable housing. Connecticut is also one of the most racially and economically segregated states in the country. Majority-white towns hoard their wealth and hide behind exclusionary zoning, while Black and brown tenants are forced to navigate a rental market rife with discrimination, unlivable conditions, and few protections.

 **85 HRS**

**NUMBER OF HOURS A MINIMUM WAGE WORKER IN CONNECTICUT NEEDS TO WORK TO AFFORD A MODEST TWO-BEDROOM APARTMENT FOR THEIR FAMILY**



## **CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON**

In face of this, our organizing over the last few years has focused on the urgent need to keep tenants in their homes and safe from hazardous conditions, evictions, and discrimination. More recently, our base has moved us to dream bigger about what safe housing really looks like. As our tenant unions fight for resident control and autonomy in rental housing in this market-based economy, we have come to understand social housing – a permanently affordable and resident controlled version of housing – as our horizon.

Our social housing work formally began in New Haven in summer 2023 when tenants were fighting for better conditions in properties owned by Ocean Management, a slumlord that owns approximately 1,000 units. Tenants at 1476 Chapel Street organized with their neighbors to form a tenant union – the second municipally-recognized union in New Haven to form at an Ocean Management-owned complex. Shortly after, the landlord put the building up for sale. Tenants knew that the only way to turn that complex into a safe place to live would be to seize control of the building, so we mobilized to try and have the city take ownership and institute a resident-controlled management process. The City did not take to the idea, but through that process we got clear on our need to develop a vision and plan for social housing citywide that was rooted in tenants' hopes and dreams, thoroughly researched, and in coalition with the key partners who could make resident-controlled development happen.

In Fall 2023, the CTTU Tenant Council formalized a Social Housing Committee to chart out how to win social housing. Since then, our primary task has been developing a shared governance vision for public or non-profit developed housing that will be resident-controlled, permanently affordable, and forever off the speculative market. We are working with our tenant union base to define what “resident controlled” means not just in theory, but in a tangible way that we can infuse into our policy and programmatic discussions with city officials and negotiate into contracts with nonprofit developers.

We are also working to design a governance model of social housing that enables socially-owned buildings to be part of and accountable to the larger CTTU statewide governing body, which would create a new model of embedding social housing in tenant organizing structures. It is a challenge to go from conceptual understandings of resident control to concrete terms and conditions for what resident control looks like in public, nonprofit, or cooperative housing, and we are taking influence from our Collective Bargaining Lease campaigns for fair leases and other cooperative housing models in the process.

We have also gotten commitments from key partners – including a nonprofit affordable housing developer, the City of New Haven, and policy and legal researchers – to help inaugurate and fund the first CTTU tenant-controlled housing cooperative in New Haven that will pilot this governance structure we are developing within our base. These partners bring key expertise on housing development that we do not have, and access to publicly-owned land that we are planning to leverage for our initial social housing sites. We are also working with labor unions to build partnerships for this project that we hope will expand to a statewide social housing campaign.

## **UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON**

Recognizing that our work cannot stop with a pilot project in New Haven, we are also developing a long-term campaign plan for winning social housing at scale. That includes learning from the successful models of cooperative housing development around the state, identifying pre-existing and possible new revenue streams to fund social housing statewide, and learning from international examples of how to develop more regulated, socially beneficial housing systems at scale. One of the core takeaways in our collective learning from these models is the importance of advocating not just for an initial revenue stream to build social housing, but also ongoing long-term operating funds to ensure the housing stays durable.



Lastly, we are working to define the “green” in green social housing through collaboration with graduate student researchers. Our dialogues have elucidated a host of factors relevant to the development of housing that will remain safe and affordability maintainable for its residents in the long term.

These factors include environmental and building material hazards like radon, lead, and toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), as well as the likelihood and impact of natural disasters on selected sites, especially those that are becoming increasingly prevalent due to climate change. Additionally, their research indicated notable considerations with respect to accessible, health-conscious, biophilic and environmentally sustainable building design, including community-owned renewable energy and green space.

The horizon of green social housing for all of Connecticut’s renters can feel far away, but the needs of tenants in our base in the face of a housing system that prioritizes profit over people give us a new urgency to fight for social housing everyday.

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*As our tenant unions fight for resident control and autonomy in rental housing in this market-based economy, we have come to understand social housing – a permanently affordable and resident controlled version of housing – as our horizon.*

**CONNECTICUT TENANTS UNION'S SOCIAL HOUSING COMMITTEE**

*This reflection was drafted collectively by the Connecticut Tenants Union Social Housing Committee.*







# ILLINOIS

## BACKGROUND

The Illinois Green New Deal Coalition (“IL GND”) is a coalition of environmental justice, climate, labor, and community groups fighting for a Green New Deal. Initially formed to advocate for national legislation, the IL GND shifted its focus to state and local policy after the passage of the federal Inflation Reduction Act (“IRA”). We knew this opportunity would be key to directing IRA funds to local projects that advance Green New Deal principles.

Green social housing is well-suited to Illinois and Chicago, which are in severe housing crises and grappling with the legacy of decades of environmental racism and public divestment. In Illinois, 27% of renter households – over 450,000 families – are extremely low income. There is a shortage of nearly 300,000 rental homes for extremely low income renters. In Chicago, 51.1% of renters are cost-burdened, amounting to 1.35 million people. Between gentrification, violence, and lack of job opportunities, many Black families have moved to the suburbs, leading to declining enrollment in Chicago public schools.

Affordable two- and three-bedroom apartments are needed to bring families back to the city and stabilize public school populations.

This affordable housing crisis was driven by public divestment, privatization, and corporate greed. It is also inextricable from a long legacy of racist policies and segregation. Chicago remains the most segregated city in the country.



**IN CHICAGO, OVER HALF (51.1%) OF RENTERS ARE COST-BURDENED, AMOUNTING TO 1.35 MILLION PEOPLE.**



Formerly redlined neighborhoods lack green infrastructure and tree cover, leaving them far hotter than other areas and saddling working-class and poor black and brown folks with much higher electric bills to cool their homes. These same areas, which for decades were zoned for industrial use, also bear greater cumulative burdens of pollution. By building a stock of green healthy housing, the IL GND aims to fight these compounding impacts around climate change, environmental, and labor exploitation; and redevelop neighborhoods that have been historically disinvested.

### **CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON**

Following a year of research and power analysis, the IL GND decided to make green social housing our core policy priority. Green social housing brings together climate and housing justice, recognizing that the same forces of capitalism that are driving up wage inequality and wealth inequality, and entrenching white supremacy, are also fueling climate change through endless extraction. Meanwhile, there simply is not enough affordable housing, and as long as housing remains on the speculative market, it will never be affordable. And as long as housing is unaffordable, it will not be possible to mobilize the kind of working class constituency that will be necessary to demand the kind of changes at scale that are needed. Green social housing addresses these problems at scale and at the roots. It also makes it possible to organize political support for climate action around people's material needs and lived experiences.

Recognizing that policies like low-income housing tax credits are a valuable tool, but inadequate to meet the need and this crisis, IL GND organizers have resolved to build a renter's paradise by tackling the supply side and building a durable political base that can fight for and protect green social housing. Green social housing is zero emissions, mixed income, public housing available to most or all. As social housing, it will remain public in perpetuity and affordable in perpetuity, including for low-income residents. People with higher incomes will pay more, helping sustain a revolving fund that will create more housing in turn. Further, it will be fully electric and zero emissions, making it eligible for funding through the IRA.

A crucial first step in Chicago, the IL GND in 2023 helped elect Mayor Johnson and the most progressive city council of the city's history. While launching his campaign, Mayor Johnson asked the coalition to help shape his environmental justice platform, eventually adopting calls for a Green New Deal. A community-labor coalition, the Grassroots Collaborative, saw an opportunity to win the Mayor's Office to build governing power. Much of the progressive organizing in Chicago has roots in the movement to respond to Mayor Rahm Emmanuel's decision to close 50 public schools in 2013.

Having achieved electoral victory, the IL GND is now (as of 2024) launching listening sessions around the green social housing plan. These listening sessions will be used to do base-building and inform the coalition's advocacy for what Green Social Housing should look like in Chicago.

### **UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON**

Chicago is ready for a political vision based on public investment for the public good. The City has endured decades of neoliberalism and austerity, but also has a rich history of resistance. Over the last decade, the Chicago Left has been organizing public demand for public institutions instead of privatization. For instance, General Iron is a scrap metal shredder that was located in Lincoln Park, a predominantly white and gentrified neighborhood. The city wanted to move it to the southeast side, which is predominantly working class and Latino. The southeast side has a long history of resistance to environmental racism, including fights for cleanup of manganese and petcoke contaminants in the soil that had made the area a cancer and asthma hotspot. When the General Iron relocation was announced, residents organized a powerful opposition with the Southeast Environmental Task Force, including a month-long hunger strike. Ultimately, the Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a finding that the proposed move was an act of environmental racism, and the permit was ultimately revoked.

*This reflection was developed by Jung Yoon, climate and housing organizer in Chicago.*





## MARYLAND

### BACKGROUND

With over 155,000 lifetime members across 46 US states, CASA is a national organization building power and improving the quality of life in working-class Black, Latino/a/e, Afro-descendent, Indigenous, and Immigrant communities. CASA creates change with its powerbuilding model blending human services, community organizing, and advocacy in order to serve the full spectrum of the needs, dreams, and aspirations of members. CASA is built on local, active member committees from Pennsylvania to Virginia to Maryland.

For housing organizers at CASA in Maryland, housing justice means bringing predictability, affordability, and stability to tenants, especially immigrant, working-class, and undocumented communities. Stability is especially crucial for the immigrant and undocumented people CASA serves because of the barriers they face in saving up enough for a security deposit, providing required documentation, and even having good credit or any credit.

These challenges, combined with wanting to provide stable public schooling for kids, and having access to supportive social networks underscore the need to stay in a unit for as long as possible. At the same time, CASA members who are unable to afford market-rate apartments often end up on subleases, which make it hard to move over time. Kids are often the most impacted by housing instability, and so in Maryland, youth advocating for their rights to stay in their homes have been powerful voices for social housing and rent control.

The housing crisis in Maryland is growing and becoming an unbearable burden to working families across the state. In 2020, in Prince George's County, for example, 50% of all renters living at all income levels were rent-burdened (up from 36% in 1990).

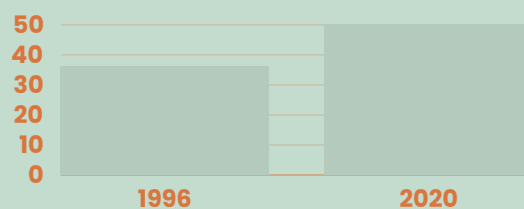
## CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

CASA focuses legislative efforts on controlling housing costs, improving housing conditions, and preventing evictions. CASA has prioritized city- and county-level rent stabilization and just-cause campaigns that benefit everyone in a jurisdiction, unlike the impact of federal voucher programs that exclude undocumented people. At the same time, organizers across Maryland are also pushing for a suite of related policies including the right of first refusal, tenant unions, community land trusts, tenant management, and publicly owned social housing. While organizers strive to pass non-exclusionary policies, they also advocate that new housing construction prioritizes the people who need it most, such as low-income, undocumented people of color – so that middle-income tenants don't come in and occupy affordable housing meant for the poorest.

Efforts to create social housing in Maryland have been led by the Green New Social Housing Deal coalition, which is a youth-led coalition devoted to investing in green new social housing. In addition to the social housing revolving fund that Montgomery County maintains, the coalition is asking the council for an investment of \$1 billion over the next 10 years towards social housing.

So far, Montgomery County has a pilot program with three buildings that are used as social housing, and funds from those buildings go towards the construction of additional social housing. The first building of 268 units is mixed income, with 30% of units affordable for households at 50 to 65% of AMI, and the remaining 70% of units market-rate. In early stages, it was assumed the County would both own and manage the building, but instead, management was turned over to Bozzuto, a for-profit real estate company that has recently been sued for price-fixing. This management was unreceptive to CASA organizers' efforts to get low-income tenants into the building, preferring households with incomes at the upper end of affordability requirements.

CASA organizers want Montgomery County's policies to do better, in ensuring social housing is deeply affordable to those who need it most. For social housing to be effective and responsible, we must prioritize low-income families, given they are the essential workers and driving economies. Building for the middle-class and hoping for it to trickle down doesn't really work. Building for higher-income levels attracts affluent in-movers to occupy developments, rather than creating more opportunity for local low-income folks. Instead, it should be a targeted approach at people who need it most.



**IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, 50% OF ALL RENTERS LIVING AT ALL INCOME LEVELS WERE RENT-BURDENED IN 2020, UP FROM 36% IN 1990.**

After losing a rent increase cap in Laurel, Maryland, CASA scaled up the campaign to win an across-the-board rent cap in Mt. Rainier that would set rent at 60% Consumer Price Index for all properties with more than two units and units over 15 years old. After this, CASA went on to win a series of rent stabilization bills across the state during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, in Montgomery County, CASA won a max 6% cap on rent increases (or the CPI Urban, whichever is lower). The measure also limits add-on fees for amenities like trash and parking, closing a loophole that landlords have used to raise rents. This was a historic victory that will stabilize rent and regulate rental junk fees for over 400,000 residents. At the end of 2023, CASA also helped win a successful campaign in Hyattsville in Prince George's County, that caps rent increases for all multi-unit properties at a flat CPI rate.



### UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

One of CASA's current priorities is enacting a rent stabilization bill, known as the People's Bill, in Prince George's County, that would permanently establish the temporary protections enacted during the pandemic. This bill would enact a flat 3% cap on annual rent increases. CASA was able to secure a one year 3% cap in 2023, and then was successful in having that cap extended for six months in 2024. CASA continues to push to make this important change permanent. We are also currently organizing an exciting tenant opportunity to purchase (TOPA) campaign in Tacoma Park. CASA is working alongside residents on feasibility studies, lending proposals, and organizing efforts to have ownership of a 101 unit property transferred to tenants (instead of to a private equity company) or, at the least, to ensure that the needs and priorities of residents and tenants are met by any future property owners.

Given the challenges of ensuring social housing policies produce deeply affordable housing, CASA organizers believe that the best way to meet this challenge is to build tenant union power, and create social housing by organizing tenants who can contest for tenant acquisition and ownership of buildings. To ensure that housing stays affordable and sustainable within the communities who need it most, we must ensure tenant unions and community partners lead the way in managing and acquiring properties for conversion to social housing.

Indeed, organizers are concerned that social housing is not always immediately impactful enough for those who need relief in this moment. So in addition to organizing for social housing, CASA continues to focus on rent control/stabilization measures that can help mitigate the rapid displacement of communities in Maryland caused by rapidly rising rents. Social housing won't matter if everyone is displaced. So for us at CASA, rent stabilization comes first, stopping the bleeding.



To meet the needs of CASA's immigrant base, policies like rent control that benefit renters broadly in the private market, regardless of immigration status, are especially critical. Likewise, CASA wishes for social housing to meet the needs of immigrants who have been excluded from subsidized housing. Again, here is where CASA sees that tenant union organizing for conversion of corporate-owned properties to community land trusts or cooperatives can play a role.

One lesson from organizing efforts in Maryland is that, due to the deeply entrenched commodification of housing, the balance of power between landlords and tenants has been challenging to shift fully. Take, for example, one building that CASA organized against egregious landlord policies in Hyattsville, MD: over 100 units went on an 18-month rent strike.

Striking families received about \$1.5 million total, but the funds they received were from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), not from the landlord or property owner. The owner eventually sold the property to a more mission-driven landlord. While the county put about \$15 million into the purchase and obtained an agreement with the new landlord to keep 50% of the units between 60 and 80% AMI, the original landlord still made \$90 million on the sale. In March 2024, the class-action lawsuit did settle in a favorable way to residents. The settlement will compensate all of the tenants of the almost 600 unit building who "opted-in" to the class action and lived through the abhorrent living conditions from 2018 to 2022. However, similar to other cases where financial settlements have been won, the outcome— while important — doesn't actually move rental properties out of landlord control.

CASA organizers have learned that every time they bring people together, they find a win. By organizing, and with legal support, tenants are able to find and target the landlord's vulnerabilities and move towards shifting ownership dynamics. Even large, private equity-owned properties have backed down and negotiated when faced with organized tenant power. Organizing against landlords is a first step; then, having built a base, legislative campaigns help lock progress in place.



*We know that we need development like Social Housing, which should be deeply affordable for working-class families, seniors, and Black and Brown Communities. While we are addressing long-term solutions, the big question is what are we doing now to meet the needs of renters who are put in a chokehold by the high cost of rents?*

**ALEX VASQUEZ**  
**CASA MARYLAND ORGANIZER**

*This reflection was developed by Trent Leon-Lierman and Alex Vazquez with contributions from Ameer Chew*





## NEW YORK

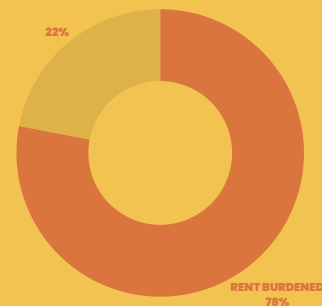
### BACKGROUND

The depth and extent of New York’s housing crisis can be bewildering. A majority (51.7%) of tenants are rent burdened, or paying more than 30 percent of their income for housing. For low-income tenants, that figure is 78%. In New York City alone, almost 93,000 people slept in homeless shelters in December 2023. Across the state there were 4,400 evictions in 2023, and the pace is rising in 2024. But as the state’s housing crisis reaches dire proportions, its housing movement is fighting for stronger protections and for social housing as a new vision for housing production.

Social housing is not new to New York. In 1935, New York City built some of the country’s first public rental housing with First Houses. When the federal government first started building public housing through the Works Progress Administration, some of the most admired projects (like the Harlem River Houses and Williamsburg Houses) were in New York City, and when the program expanded under the Wagner Act, New York State got over 225,000 public rental homes.



A MAJORITY (51.7%) OF NY TENANTS ARE RENT BURDENED, OR PAYING MORE THAN 30 PERCENT OF THEIR INCOME FOR HOUSING.



FOR LOW-INCOME TENANTS, THAT FIGURE IS 78%.



# 93,000

PEOPLE SLEPT IN HOMELESS SHELTERS IN  
DECEMBER 2023.

# 4,400

EVICCTIONS TOOK PLACE ACROSS THE STATE  
IN 2023

At the same time, unions and radical political groups were building tens of thousands of limited-equity co-operatives. In the 1950s, the state created its own highly successful program for building new affordable co-operatives and subsidized rentals, known as Mitchell Lama, which supported the development of nearly 70,000 co-op units. In the 1980s, New York City became the de facto owner of thousands of landlord-abandoned rental buildings, disposing a portion of them to their tenants through the Tenant-Interim-Lease (TIL) program, who then turned them into limited-equity co-operatives, known as Housing Development Fund Corporations (HDFCs). And since the 1990s, New York State tenant and homeless organizers have focused on supporting Community Land Trusts (CLTs), some of which contain buildings run as Mutual Housing Associations. So while the language of “social housing” might not yet be common around New York State, examples of it abound.

Even today, Mitchell Lama co-operatives are extremely popular and are widely considered to be some of the best affordable housing in the city, in terms of both price and quality. Meanwhile, the examples provided by HDFCs and CLTs have awakened many tenants to the possibility of taking over their buildings without the expectation of windfall profits. While there remain capacity and financing challenges for some HDFC boards and CLTs, with some growing faster than they can manage, their existence is a proof of concept for social housing conversions more broadly. Finally, Public housing is a crucial component of the social housing landscape, evidenced by its extensive waiting list, which surpasses the total number of available apartments (275,000 households versus 178,000 apartments).

## CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

Today, tenants and homeless New Yorkers are organizing around several concurrent social housing campaigns, which focus on legislative and administrative changes on the city and state level. On the state level, Housing Justice for All (HJ4A) – a statewide movement of tenants and homeless New Yorkers – is supporting a bill introduced with tenant, homeless and labor support by Assemblymember Emily Gallagher and Senator Cordell Cleare to create a New York State Social Housing Development Authority (SHDA). If passed, the SHDA which would acquire, develop, finance, and steward social housing across New York State. Through both new construction and acquisition/conversion, SHDA could create public rentals and limited-equity co-operatives, with rents and fees capped at 25 percent of household income. It must create homes affordable to extremely low-income households, but it can create housing at all income levels. Its board is made up not just of political appointees, but of residents elected by SHDA tenants. SHDA marks a major shift from the status quo, and so the passage and implementation of this bills is a longer-term goal for organizers in New York State.

More immediately, the housing justice movement in New York is fighting for laws that enable existing private housing to be converted into social housing. On the state level, the New York City Community Land Initiative (NYCCLI, the city's coalition of Community Land Trusts and their supporters) and HJ4A are organizing for a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase (TOPA) bill, with an accompanying five-year \$250 million budget ask. New York State's TOPA bill would give tenants the right of first refusal when their building goes up for sale, allowing them to convert it into a limited-equity co-operative, work with a local public housing authority to turn it into public housing, or bring in a nonprofit or a community land trust owner. On the city level, NYCCLI is organizing for the Community Land Act, a slate of bills that would create the infrastructure for social housing conversions.





If enacted, these bills would prioritize nonprofits and community land trusts for development opportunities on public land, give community organizations a first shot at acquiring privately owned parcels when they go up for sale, and replace the city's extractive practice of selling property tax liens with a system that would convert financially distressed, tax delinquent buildings into social housing.

In addition to policies that support the direct development of social housing or social housing conversions, New Yorkers are organizing to make extractive and predatory housing models less viable and organizing more feasible. Stronger tenant protections in the form of statewide Right to Counsel, Good Cause eviction protection, a winter eviction moratorium, more proactive code enforcement, and local voucher programs would all create a more favorable environment for social housing conversion and stewardship. For instance, when the government expands protections against unjust rent increases to a new sector of the housing market, tenants directly benefit; at the same time, rent regulation limits potential income that drives rising prices and outsized profits, causing speculative investors to lose interest in that sector. A similar reaction is likely when the government improves housing code standards and enforcement: tenants' living standards improve while neglectful landlords are forced to reinvest more rental income back into their buildings, thus limiting the outsized profits that landlords would otherwise generate through minimal maintenance expenses. Housing vouchers, while often used to subsidize private housing, can just as well be used to make social housing affordable to people at all income levels.

## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

Social housing presents a concrete alternative to the current housing system, where economic downturns and upswings both result in higher rents and eventual displacement for tenants. It is an alternative vision that gives tenants and homeless New Yorkers something to organize around, and raises the expectations for leftist candidates for political offices. In New York, it both allows the housing justice movement to provide an expansionist vision, beyond defending existing tenant protections or public and subsidized housing, while also building on our state's prior social housing successes. The proposed SHDA, for example, would build and improve on the best features of New York's history with pre-federal public housing (locally-controlled public rentals, but with a stronger role for resident democracy in the authority), Mitchell Lama co-operatives (newly built limited-equity co-ops, but without the possibility of future privatization), and HDPC co-operatives (conversions of rentals to non-profit co-ops, but with better long-term affordability guidelines).

Since social housing campaigns function on long-term timelines, they build capacity among grassroots coalitions. Full participation by residents is a necessity for successful and just implementation of any legislation rooted in housing justice. Through organizing, tenant and homeless leaders build expertise to eventually play a future role in the development and stewardship of social housing.

*This reflection was drafted by Samuel Stein and Oksana Mironova of the Community Service Society.*





## RHODE ISLAND

### BACKGROUND

Since the pandemic, the housing market in Rhode Island has become increasingly unaffordable. With an influx of new residents moving to Rhode Island to work remotely, particularly from areas like Boston, rents have skyrocketed. Meanwhile, new construction, already meager, slowed during the pandemic and due to a high-interest lending environment, and has not yet resumed in force. As a result, a long-term housing crisis facing the lowest income tenants has expanded to affect many middle-class renters, making housing affordability the key political issue in the state.

### CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

This accelerating housing crisis has also presented organizers in Rhode Island with a political opportunity, shifting the Overton window to include more radical solutions for housing reform. Organizers at Reclaim Rhode Island have landed on a long-term vision of social housing based on a state-wide public developer.

The public developer would engage in both direct and financed development, using a revolving fund to continuously construct new housing. Similar to the Montgomery county, Maryland model, the Rhode Island public developer is designed to ensure affordability through a mixed-income cross-subsidy model, meaning that higher-income residents would pay higher rents to help subsidize rents for lower-income tenants. At least 30% of residences in publicly developed buildings would be occupied by low-income tenants. Reclaim is committed to continuously deepening and widening the affordability of new public housing through tapping Section 8 dollars and, over the medium and long term, calling for increased direct state subsidy. Once a public developer exists, Reclaim aims to reorient its campaign around the right to housing, making the case that the state has the ability to build the homes people need and must do so.

# -24,054

**SHORTAGE OF RENTAL HOMES  
AFFORDABLE AND AVAILABLE FOR  
EXTREMELY LOW INCOME RENTERS**

While the idea of the public developer was initially seen as an outside-the-box solution, it has become increasingly mainstreamed over the past couple years. In particular, the public developer model has a potentially broad base of support because—unlike means-tested housing—it benefits tenants across the economic spectrum. In 2023, the Rhode Island legislature considered H 6168, which would have issued \$50 million in bonds to capitalize the revolving fund for a public developer. The developer would get paid back as housing gets leased up, and then that capital can be again leveraged to finance the construction of more housing.

That legislation has been introduced again this year in both the House and the Senate with strong labor backing; in addition, there is a possibility that the public developer will be funded through a proposed \$100 million housing bond expected to be on this November's ballot. Secretary of Housing Stefan Pryor has ordered a feasibility study on public development from which interim findings are expected by late April or early May. A public developer has strong chances of being established this year.

Key support for the public developer model in Rhode Island has come from progressive legislators, center-left Speaker of the House Joseph Shekarchi, Sec. Pryor, the Working Families Party, and a powerful alliance with unions, particularly the building trades and SEIU 1199 NE. Organizers have gained the support of unions by writing prevailing wage requirements into bills allocating funds for new construction. Especially because the building trades do not have a high density of contracts in the residential sector, they have been eager to support legislation that would fuel contracts and job growth.

Meanwhile, community development nonprofits have been skeptical of housing programs that fall outside the nonprofit sector. Through numerous conversations highlighting that the public developer would simply provide a new funding stream, however, the nonprofit sector has come to a position of at best neutrality towards the new model.

## **UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON**

To organizers in Rhode Island, giving the state capacity to develop social housing is not only a good in itself; it also will empower the lowest-income tenants to fight for improved conditions and more power. Thus, public investment in building social housing and tenant protections are inherently intertwined. Building on this knowledge, Reclaim Rhode Island has built grassroots support by organizing low-income tenants, starting in early 2022 with properties owned by slumlord Pioneer Investments. Organizers began with a test canvass, which found that tenants were already angry about poor housing conditions. That campaign reached its climax with the RI Attorney General's 2023 decision to file a historic lawsuit against Pioneer.

In recent months, Reclaim has been focused on organizing tenants of slumlord Elmwood Realty. In March, a group of tenants at an Elmwood property in Cranston announced the establishment of what appears to be the first majority tenant union outside of public housing in Rhode Island history. This Elmwood Tenants Union is the building block of a larger, statewide Rhode Island Tenants Union (RITU). We believe that our power over the medium and long term to grow the public developer system so that it creates a true social housing system in Rhode Island depends upon our ability to build a statewide tenant union with a large and mobilized membership.

*This reflection was developed by Daniel Denvir of Reclaim Rhode Island.*

**Reclaim  RI**



## WASHINGTON, D.C.

### BACKGROUND

The District of Columbia has pioneered some of the country's most advanced tenant protections, but these alone have not sufficiently prevented extreme gentrification and displacement. This is not due to a lack of organization on the part of D.C. tenants, but rather the immense resources of speculative real estate investors and their influence on the D.C. Council. Tenants have fought back: the Home Rule movement, which came directly out of the Black civil rights movement of the 1960s, successfully established the D.C. Council and local home rule administration. It then quickly passed a set of ambitious regulations, including rent control and vacancy control in 1985. Rent and vacancy controls apply to all homes built before 1975 – which in 1985 was almost all of them – but updating this threshold has been a challenge ever since. Vacancy control exists, but is considerably weaker and allows for higher rent increases than rent control. DC also passed the nation's first Tenant Opportunity to Purchase (TOPA) law – which has recently been rolled back and remains under attack – as well as strong just-cause and housing code protections.

All of these measures have been won through struggle and compromised under attack from an extremely powerful real estate industry allied with business and anti-statehood interests in Congress, and the fight over social housing which is ramping up will undoubtedly be no different.

Local advocates have laid groundwork through advocacy for social housing in the press for years. Their vision is to build beautiful, green homes for everyone in D.C. who needs one, and organizers are convinced that social housing campaigns can get them there.



**1 IN 4 PUBLIC HOUSING UNITS SIT VACANT DURING DC AFFORDABILITY CRISIS**



**MORE THAN 1 IN 10 DC RESIDENTS ARE HOUSING INSECURE, NEW REPORT SHOWS**



## CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

The Green New Deal for Housing Act was first introduced in 2022 by Councilmember Janeese Lewis George, who had been elected two years earlier by a coalition of labor, democratic socialist, housing justice, and environmental groups. Getting a bill introduced was a landmark achievement for the D.C. social housing movement, which had previously lacked an elected political champion but now had a bill with 7 total co-sponsors, a bare majority. The bill has also created an organizing vehicle for local progressive organizations – including the Metro D.C. chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (MDC DSA), D.C. for Democracy, Empower DC, Jobs with Justice, Jews United for Justice, Spaces in Action, and the local chapter of the Sunrise Movement – to coalesce around clear demands in the Green New Deal for DC (GND4DC) coalition. It also enables progressive research organizations including the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, and a more recently founded Center for Social Housing and Public Investment, to engage more deeply in the political process.

The existence of a model of public housing development nearby in Montgomery County, Maryland, was cited as a factor making the local legislation more viable (this model is discussed in more detail in CASA Maryland's contribution). Legislators visited the properties that have been built by Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) and came away with a more positive impression of the potential of social housing development despite some of the conventional stigmas around government-backed housing.

MDC DSA's Stomp Out Slumlords (SOS) campaign has organized extensively with tenants in private and subsidized housing, from leading rent strikes and #CancelRent protests to training building leaders and setting up application clinics for rental assistance during the COVID public health emergency. SOS has seen their biggest successes and most persuasive campaigns focused around enforcement and usage of existing tenant rights in private housing, like TOPA and the implied warrant of habitability standard in the DC housing code, but this has not necessarily implied widely renewed interest in socialized housing.

Ongoing disputes around the D.C. Housing Authority (DCHA), an agency with a decades-long negative reputation, a history of bungled privatization efforts, and which has been on the verge of receivership for several years, have made legislators and tenants alike considerably skeptical of expanding the portfolio of publicly-owned homes. The model of the Housing Opportunities Commission – an agency separate to the public housing authority that is building new and generally high-quality structures – in Montgomery County has generated more optimism among legislators, staffers and tenants involved in the campaign, and presents a strategic opportunity to leverage and multiply tenant power across private and publicly owned housing in the District.

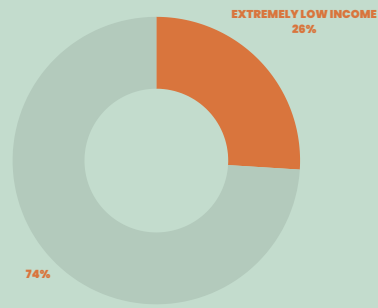
Criticism of the HOC model from D.C. based housing justice organizers centers around the prospect of “mixed-income housing” skewing towards middle-income tenants to the exclusion of lower-income tenants. DC has a public land disposition law that mandates up to 30% of housing units created as a result of a public land sale must be affordable for the lifetime of the building, essentially mirroring the HOC model, minus the public ownership aspect, but similarly forgoing any direct connection with the public housing portfolio and its associated benefits and liabilities. Community groups in the Green New Deal coalition wish to push for a larger proportion of deeply affordable housing than recently developed in Montgomery by the HOC. Organizers with SPACES in Action (SIA), a community-based membership organization of mostly Black and Brown residents that has focused on the climate justice angle of housing -- have been advocating for 100% below-market rate development. Deja Williams, Health Equity Organizer at SIA, explains: "There needs to be more affordability if we want to keep DC native and residents in DC. Me being someone who makes a median income, without dependents, I've been forced to move out of DC... because I can't afford the studio apartments in the \$1,300 and \$1,400s. That's ridiculous. The Green New Deal will create publicly owned housing and we need affordable housing, for us. For too long we've been pushed out due to gentrification in the city. If we're going to promote a bill about what's right for renters, it definitely has to be for 100% affordability."

Acknowledging the concerns about income skew at HOC, GND4DC organizers believe an independent agency model can be coupled with robust public subsidy to create a more equitable income mix with deeper affordability. Some believe that the fight for subsidies to social housing will be easier to win once a structure capable of absorbing those subsidies is written into law and an agency created that can advocate for them within government, and do not believe HOC should be written off as one potential model for social housing, even with its acknowledged limitations. Moreover, despite D.C.'s uphill battle with anti-statehood interests, the compact nature of the city could make eventual integration with the public housing portfolio much easier, once the social housing portfolio is on a path to sustainability.

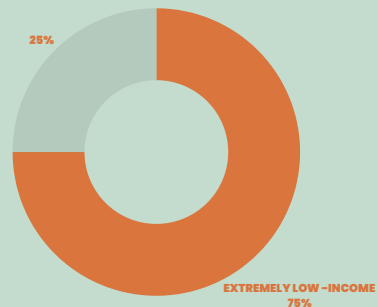
The legislation in D.C. was introduced with set asides for the most marginalized renters, including requirements for properties to set aside one-third of the units for extremely low income renters (0-30% AMI) and a further third for very low income renters (30-50% AMI). It also would create tenant oversight boards with the power to hire and fire contractors and management for the properties, which would be supported by the existing city Office of the Tenant Advocate in carrying out their roles. The buildings would require net-zero emissions and contractors would receive significant bid preference for using Project Labor Agreements with union labor.

### UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

A majority of members of the D.C. Council (seven) now support the legislation which was reintroduced this year, but the inevitable mayoral veto means the bill requires a minimum of nine votes for a veto-proof majority. Proponents believe this is possible, but are unsure what compromises may be necessary – or acceptable – to get the bill over the line in the current session. Organizations will have to continue consulting with their bases about the demands of several councilmembers who are themselves favorable to a social housing program but are also political allies of Mayor Muriel Bowser, who has taken large sums of money from landlord and real estate interests and generally favors their policy agendas. It may be possible to reach a deal on a bill that is sufficiently strong to be worth passing, but this is uncertain at the time of writing.



**RENTER HOUSEHOLDS ARE EXTREMELY LOW INCOME**



**75% OF EXTREMELY LOW-INCOME RENTER HOUSEHOLDS WITH SEVERE COST BURDEN**

**\$73,520**

**ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME NEEDED TO AFFORD A TWO-BEDROOM RENTAL HOME AT HUD'S FAIR MARKET RENT**

**\$43,210**

**AVERAGE INCOME LIMIT FOR EXTREMELY LOW INCOME HOUSEHOLD**



Due to its unique status as a combined municipal and state-level government (though with considerably fewer rights than any U.S. state), the District of Columbia has unique capabilities and challenges in advancing a green social housing agenda. The city has just the unicameral legislature to contend with and can raise its own taxes with few restrictions, but also faces Congressional interference and a powerful Chief Financial Officer (CFO) who has to approve budgetary estimates. Advocates believe the CFO has sometimes used unrealistic estimates to hinder the implementation of progressive policies, while underestimating the cost of more conservative or real estate-backed policies. Even more dangerous is the strong mayor system deeply shaped by the anti-democratic, Congressionally-imposed Financial Control Board period of the late 90s. Even if a social housing bill passes, the CFO and the Mayor could interfere to harm its implementation, similar to what occurred with recent legislation to make bus transit free and expand the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Organizers are extremely committed to making social housing work in D.C., and so the fight – whether legislation passes this session or not – will continue.



*I think that getting green social housing in DC, in America's capital, could just make this idea spread like wildfire across the entire country.*

**DAVID POMS, GREEN NEW DEAL FOR DC**

*This reflection was drafted by David Poms, with contributions from Green New Deal for DC coalition members.*



**GREEN**

**NEW DEAL**



# NATIONAL







## THE ALLIANCE FOR HOUSING JUSTICE: SUPPORTING THE MOVEMENT FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

### BACKGROUND

The Alliance for Housing Justice (AHJ) is a partnership between Action Center on Race and the Economy, Center for Popular Democracy, Housing Justice for All NY, Housing Now! CA, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Liberation in a Generation, National Housing Law Project, PolicyLink, Poverty & Race Research Action Council, PowerSwitch Action, Public Advocates and the Right to the City Alliance.

The Alliance for Housing Justice (AHJ) was formed to address the nation's affordable housing and displacement crises, advance the rights of tenants, respond to harmful policy actions, challenge systemic racism, and shift the narrative from housing as a commodity to a human right. Our primary strategy to achieve these goals is helping to build and support the infrastructure needed for a powerful, grassroots-led housing justice movement.

### CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON

It's through grassroots partnerships that we've realized that in order to truly make real the human right to housing, we have to also work towards a new system of how people, especially the most vulnerable, find and keep housing that is racially equitable, safe, affordable and accessible – and move away from a system that prioritizes profit and speculation.

Together we made the decision to add an intentional focus to our work on supporting the creation of this kind of a housing system, often called social housing, and supporting the grassroots led groups around the country who are trying to bring it to scale.

AHJ and our partners have identified eight key components of social housing for our advocacy. This list is not exhaustive, but is a bedrock to build on:

- Socially owned by the public, tenants or mission-driven non-profits
- Permanently decommodified and off the speculative, profit-driven market
- Permanently affordable for all - preferencing those at the lowest income levels, but available to those of low and moderate incomes.
- Under community control - operated in a way that is accountable to residents and their communities
- Actively anti-racist and equitable
- Sustainable housing that is climate resilient and energy efficient
- Safe, well-maintained and adequate to the needs of residents including those with disabilities, families with children, seniors and others
- With tenant security guaranteed by strong tenant protections

All across the country, grassroots and renter-led groups are working to implement social housing and social housing principles into their work to acquire, preserve and create housing. AHJ and our partners have identified four key strategies for how we can best support and provide tools to groups working on the ground. First is identifying current federal programs and funding that can support social housing. Second is by advocating for shifting existing funding streams to more actively preference social housing. Third is by advocating for major federal investment of new resources specifically towards social housing. Fourth is engaging in work to educate the public and policy makers about social housing and to shift the narrative in this country away from housing as an investment commodity, and towards a human right.

Our first and second strategies are related. First, we are working to identify, and help local groups access, current federal funding for social housing uses. The federal government currently spends billions of dollars every year to support the creation and maintenance of “affordable housing,” but the vast majority of those dollars are going to maintain a system that leaves too many out and that props up a for-profit system. For example, income requirements that do not meet those most in need where they are, or tax credits that expire and return land and housing to the private market perpetuate a cycle that leaves the most vulnerable continuously at a disadvantage. Current law and regulations for some of these funds would allow their use for social housing but those opportunities need to be identified and tools given to local groups to be able to effectively advocate for them. But many funds are locked, by code and regulation, into uses that perpetuate the current, broken system. Despite the common refrain around public/private partnerships, the reality is that our shared resources can go a lot further for a lot longer when they are directed towards permanent affordability. Deep investments in social housing can stop the merry-go-round of constantly losing affordable housing to the private market and to disinvestment.

Our third strategy is advocating for federal investment in a permanently affordable housing system that is equal to the need. Even if we succeed in redirecting the current level of federal investment allocated to support affordable housing and combat homelessness towards social housing, the amount remains woefully inadequate. Public housing, for example, could and must be a part of a thriving social housing system, but a coordinated and concerted racist effort to discredit and demonize public housing has led to a \$70 billion backlog in repairs just to bring it to habitability. Ending homelessness, making sure every single person has safe, affordable and suitable housing is a moral and economic imperative for our nation and it requires real, deep investment from our federal, state and local governments to become a reality.



## UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

We have to spread the word that another world for housing ourselves and our neighbors is possible. We know what works from smaller scale social housing in this country - like tenant cooperative, community land-trusts and well maintained public housing - and from across the globe where cities and countries have built thriving social housing systems. But it will take time to educate the public and policy-makers that there is a much better way if we start putting people before corporate profit.

This year AHJ will be releasing the first in a series of videos to explain and popularize Social Housing, along with a [set of policy papers](#) that go further into depth on the social housing principles. We will also be releasing a toolkit that will, along with technical assistance that we can provide, help local and state organizers plan campaigns to reform their state Low Income Housing Tax Credit rules to bring them closer in line with social housing principles.

And we will continue to work with allies and allied policy makers to bring the public resources this work requires in order to truly realize the promise of a widespread social housing system in the U.S.

*This section was drafted by Liz Ryan Murray of Public Advocates.*





## RENTERS RISING & THE CENTER FOR POPULAR DEMOCRACY: ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL HOUSING AT THE LOCAL & FEDERAL LEVELS

### BACKGROUND

Renters Rising is a national alliance of tenants working to shift the balance of power between renters and corporate landlords, so that renters are able to live with dignity. Renters Rising has been organizing a national tenant association of people who live in properties owned by the largest corporate landlords such as Blackstone, Invitation Homes, Related Properties and others. Since its launch in 2021, its network of 14 organizations has organized over 17,000 active members and tenant leaders in 12 states.



The Center for Popular Democracy is a national network of over 50 base-building groups, alliances, and unions across the country. Its housing justice cohort began meeting regularly in 2018, and has included over 27 affiliate organizations, such as Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), CASA of Maryland, New York Communities for Change (NYCC), Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH), Texas Organizing Project (TOP), Action NC, Florida Rising, Detroit Action, Make the Road CT, Make the Road NJ, Make the Road NY, Make the Road NV, Make the Road PA, One PA, Maine People's Alliance, Maryland Communities United, Arkansas Community Organizations, Fuerte, Stand Up Alaska, Rights and Democracy, OLE New Mexico, and others. In 2020, the cohort decided to organize against shared national corporate landlord targets, to build power, and make a bigger impact together on the U.S. housing system. Cohort members helped found Renters Rising the following year.



We felt the need to come together at the national level, to target corporate landlords and coordinate organizing of these tenants, because we recognize the outsized impact corporate landlords have on the housing market. Furthermore, CPD and many housing justice organizations in our network see the fight against corporate landlords as a central part of the longer-term struggle to expand social housing. Corporate landlords are a strategic target in the fight for social housing, for both material and narrative reasons.

### **CAMPAIGNS BEING FOUGHT AND/OR WON**

At the grassroots, community organizations in Renters Rising and CPD's housing justice cohort are involved in organizing tenant unions, and campaigning for a range of tenant protections such as rent control, just cause, right to counsel, right to organize, habitability standards enforcement, and more. Tenant unions' power to collectively bargain with corporate landlords and seek policy changes are a critical driver of change.

In recent years, Renters Rising has protested at the industry conferences of corporate landlord organizations such as the National Rental Home Council (NRHC) and the National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC). Renters Rising is calling on corporate landlords to meet with tenants, to negotiate over better living conditions and limits on rent increases, and to transfer ownership of housing to the people. By raising the bar among the industry's worst actors, Renters Rising seeks to improve living conditions and affordability for all renters.

A key narrative that we seek to advance, is that corporate control of the housing market is the problem – the main driver of our affordable housing crisis – and that conversely, decommmodifying housing is the solution.

Since 2023, Renters Rising has targeted public pension funds in North Carolina, California, and Texas that invest in Blackstone, calling on them to divest. In California, ACCE has launched a campaign calling on the University of California to divest from Blackstone. These campaigns can serve as a basis for seeking that these funding sources instead finance social housing.

Renters Rising also seeks to support organizing for green social housing at the federal, state, and local levels. This includes supporting campaigns for significant public funding of permanently affordable housing, and supporting tenant organizing for the transfer of corporate-owned properties to community control, whether under public housing authorities, community land trusts, or limited equity cooperatives.

We are especially interested in targeting corporate landlords who have expanded into the affordable housing industry (such as Blackstone and Related which are investor-owners of LIHTCs, and corporate landlords that are for-profit owners of Project Based Section 8). Tenant organizing against the unhealthy conditions, evictions, and rent increases they face in for-profit subsidized housing can open opportunities to seek the transfer of these properties from corporate to public ownership or community control. Exposing the problems in our current affordable housing system can help advance policies for truly decommmodified housing.

In 2022, CPD and Renters Rising co-released a report on our vision for social housing, that centers the perspectives of tenant organizations in low-income communities and communities of color: "[Social Housing for All: A Vision for Thriving Communities, Renter Power, and Racial Justice.](#)" We have developed comprehensive federal, state, and local policy platforms that include cutting government support for corporate landlords, strengthening tenant rights, and generously funding permanently and deeply affordable social housing.

Key principles of social housing for CPD and Renters Rising include: resident power, through tenant unions with the right to collective bargaining, and democratic community control; racial justice; and deep affordability, prioritizing those most in need. To effectively curb homelessness and displacement, social housing programs must first serve the lowest-income residents, at the scale of their need. Social housing must be financed through generous direct public funding, to do so.

CPD sees quality public housing – publicly owned, directly funded by the government, and hence affordable to the lowest-income people – as a cornerstone of social housing, critical for ensuring housing options exist for the poorest households. Government support should also expand community land trusts and tenant cooperatives, as other forms of social housing offering non-profit community control and limited equity homeownership.

**The House Every One Campaign:** In 2023, the Center for Popular Democracy’s network of over 50 affiliates launched a national campaign for green social housing, together with Renters Rising and groups organizing unhoused people, called House Every One. This year, \_\_\_ affiliates who have been organizing the unhoused came together and formed an unhoused organizing cohort to support the House Every One campaign. We seek to move funding for social supportive housing and to drive home the fact that housing is the solution to homelessness.

The goals of the House Every One campaign are multi-level. On the state and local levels, we continue organizing tenants and unhoused people to push for progressive policy change that expands housing as a public, instead of private, good. We also seek to win the conversion of corporate-owned properties into social housing.

### UPCOMING AND ON THE HORIZON

On the federal level, CPD and CPD Action, our 501c4, seek to win generous public funding for permanently and deeply affordable social housing. Our campaign is demanding \$1 trillion over 10 years in federal funding to create 12 million permanently and deeply affordable homes, as well as significant funds to fully repair and make energy efficient all our public housing. We are demanding that President Biden use his executive power to create an Office of Social Housing under HUD, that would help align existing government programs and agencies to advance social housing, and run pilot projects to create social housing. We demand that Congress provide pilot money to the Office, and also create a Social Housing Development Authority to carry out acquisitions of property for conversion to social housing, in coordination with public housing authorities.

We are supporting legislation that increases and improves current social housing, including public housing – such as the Green New Deal for Public Housing Act, and a Social Housing Development Authority bill.

The Center for Popular Democracy seeks to organize renters and unhoused individuals at a mass scale to build the power necessary to win progressive housing policies.

*This reflection was developed by Ameer Chew of the Center for Popular Democracy*



November 2023

## House Every One!

**Our Communities Can't Take More Cuts!**  
**The U.S. has a housing crisis – Green Social Housing is the solution**

Republican leaders' proposed budget cuts, from slashing affordable housing and food assistance to education and environmental protection, threaten decades of harm to our communities, and particularly low-income communities of color.

**We call on Biden and Congress to ensure there are no cuts to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). To solve our nation's long-standing and deepening housing emergency, while responding to the global climate crisis, we demand visionary and massive federal funding for green social housing!**

**We need bold federal action! The federal government must:**

- **Stop the proposed cuts to HUD and to services for our communities!**
- **Fund Green Social Housing:** Provide \$1 trillion over ten years to create 12 million units of permanently and deeply affordable housing for our communities; and enact a Green New Deal for public housing, to provide at least \$180 billion over ten years to fully repair, modernize, and green our public housing stock.
- **We are asking President Biden to create an Office of Social Housing, under HUD, to support pilot projects for creating social housing.**

**Corporate landlords and Wall Street investors are driving our housing emergency. We need our elected officials to intervene.**

Everyone deserves safe, decent, and affordable housing. But today, corporate control over our homes is unprecedented and expanding.<sup>1</sup> Corporate landlords and Wall Street investors are jacking up rents and evicting families.<sup>2</sup> Our nation's 114 million renters<sup>3</sup> have few basic rights or protections against these abuses. Most can lose their housing anytime, at their landlord's whim. What's more, large corporate landlords concentrate their predatory investment, rent hikes, evictions, and health violations in Black and Brown communities – often those same neighborhoods most harmed by the foreclosure crisis, on top of decades of wealth-stripping, redlining, and neglect – exacerbating our country's racial and economic inequalities.<sup>4</sup>

THE POPULAR CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY



THE POPULAR CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY

## What do we mean by "Social Housing"?

**We want social housing for all!**

This means: housing that is **permanently and truly affordable** to lower-income residents; that is under **public ownership or democratic community control**; and that can **never be resold for profit**. Social housing is democratically managed through the input of resident associations and tenant unions.

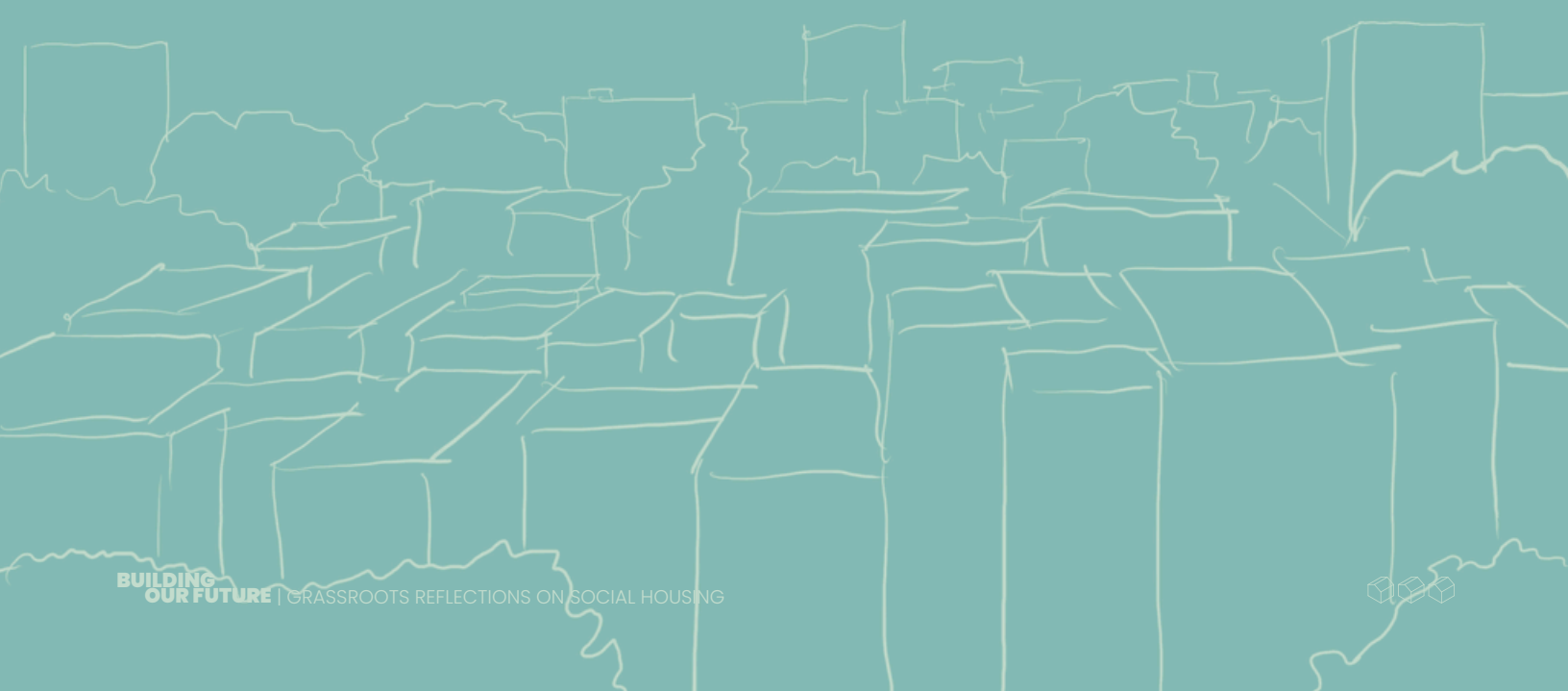
Social housing is for everyone. To curb homelessness and displacement, social housing programs must first start by **prioritizing** those most in need: low-income residents and people of color who have the least housing options. At scale, social housing provides affordable housing options for the majority of the population, including moderate-income households – in order to limit the power and influence of large corporate landlords.

**Social housing is housing for people, not profit!**




03

# THE MOVEMENT NOW & THE MOVEMENT AHEAD



# THE MOVEMENT NOW & THE MOVEMENT AHEAD

Social housing has emerged as a powerful banner for the movement for housing justice. While social housing itself is not a novel idea and some examples, such as the Dudley Street Community Land Trust in Boston or limited equity cooperatives such as the Amalgamated Housing Cooperative in New York, date back decades, the social housing movement is showing a strong resurgence in this moment.

The pandemic showed just how precarious housing is for so many, just as the absence of meaningful government response showed that solutions need to come and are coming from these communities themselves. A few years ago, housing justice movements were only fighting *against* gentrification, displacement, and landlord abuses. **Today, as they continue to push against these dynamics, movements are also fighting *for* something: a system of good, permanently affordable, quality housing that puts power and control in the hands of communities.**

For too long we have allowed “solutions” and fixes come from those who stand to benefit from speculation and profiteering from housing. From Low-Income Tax Credits that line the pockets of Wall Street investors to mortgage schemes that promise homeownership but deliver only debt, mainstream housing policy solutions continue to prioritize profit-making over the welfare of communities. The preceding reflections from the grassroots are testament to something else: there exists a shared and powerful vision and viable pathway that advances community stability and welfare, and makes real the right to housing, inclusion, and stewardship of the environment. The tools and strategies that are emerging and being deployed in cities and states may be different, but the momentum behind this shared imagination of a housing system oriented for *people* and *not profit*, is growing.

Each state or local campaign, of course, reflects the spirit and history of its local communities. Though they take inspiration from existing models, all of these campaigns emerge from distinctive organizing contexts and are responsive in the first instance to the conditions and needs around them. Everywhere social housing campaigns are asserting a different logic than traditional market systems and market fixes, but this has different accents across the land that are shaped by local histories of struggles.





## ONE COMMON GOAL & A DIVERSITY OF DEMANDS



Campaigns for social housing today are pushing for a range of interventions and from a range of starting points, from rent stabilization measures and inclusionary zoning ordinances to the establishment of community land trusts and public development authorities. Campaign demands span national rent control and a \$1 trillion federal investment in green social housing, to more localized efforts for excessive wealth taxes and tenant-controlled housing cooperative models. In some places, the focus is on building social housing now, while in others it is about creating the legal and financial infrastructure for eventually developing social housing. And in yet other campaigns, it is about developing the political conditions, such as empowering tenant unions and electing allied leaders, that would enable these changes at all.

Despite different emphases and targets, everywhere the goal is long-term and structural change to the housing system. Specific policy demands reflect the unique strategies and objectives of each campaign:

Organizers in the **Bay Area** of California have employed a variety of tactics to address the severe housing and affordability crisis in their region. These include more radical direct actions such as occupation and debt strikes by tenant unions. Additionally, organizers have used political strategies such as municipal ballot initiatives to enact policies like transfer taxes for funding social housing and authorizing units of social housing. These efforts have been driven by coalition building among and between tenant and housing justice organizations, in collaboration with labor unions.

In **Houston** (and other cities in Texas), organizers have focused on access to FEMA funding post-Hurricane Harvey and later shifting to eviction prevention and improving housing conditions during the pandemic. To build their base and achieve their goals, groups are organizing tenants building-by-building, particularly targeting properties with high rates of eviction and corporate landlords. With an eye towards social housing, they use tenant organizing and political strategies to support local candidates who prioritize tenant issues and have successfully influenced policy changes in Harris County, such as the Tenant Protection Policy for subsidized affordable housing.

Organizers in the **Inland Empire** in CA are also employing a multifaceted approach to advocate for social housing and address the housing crisis. Groups are establishing community land trusts (CLTs) and subsidy retention programs to create permanently affordable housing, focusing on joint ownership models to build equity for low-income individuals. Additionally, they are engaging with municipalities to pass ordinances such as inclusionary housing requirements and advocating for policies like Tenant Opportunity to Purchase to empower tenants and prevent displacement. Furthermore, they are actively campaigning against discriminatory practices like “crime-free” housing ordinances, and organizing tenants unions to collectively address issues of housing insecurity and exploitation.

In **Los Angeles**, organizers have adopted various tactics and strategies to advance the vision of social housing. They successfully campaigned for a ballot measure establishing a tax on property sales over \$5 million to fund affordable housing and homelessness prevention. Additionally, they are advocating for tenant ownership and management through a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act campaign and fostering collaborations among community organizations and community land trusts through the Los Angeles Housing Training Hub.

In **Kansas City, Missouri**, organizations have undertaken a series of strategic campaigns to advocate for tenants’ rights and affordable housing, including securing a \$50 million bond for affordable housing. Additionally, they have strategically engaged in local elections, electing tenant champions to the City Council to ensure effective implementation of pro-tenant policies. Looking ahead, organizers are focused on advancing the concept of municipal social housing, envisioning it as publicly-owned and democratically controlled housing infrastructure. They plan to engage their community in discussions about funding and governance structures, emphasizing co-governance led by their base through neighborhood tenant unions. However, they face challenges from real estate interests and conservative state governments, necessitating a nationwide effort to build tenant power and counter hostile political environments.

In **Seattle**, organizers successfully campaigned for I-135, a ballot initiative establishing the Seattle Social Housing Developer (SSHD) to address that city’s deep housing crisis. The initiative mandates publicly owned, permanently affordable housing across income levels, funded through a bonding mechanism. Groups are presently is focused on campaigns to ensure strong and permanent funding mechanisms for the SSHD, including through Initiative 137 which would mandate an excess compensation payroll tax, as well as collaborations with non-profit housing providers to increase housing density in the city.

At the state level, in **California**, the focus has been on addressing the severe housing crisis through a statewide effort to decommodify housing. Led by a coordinating committee of various organizations, coalitions have achieved legislative victories such as SB 555, which mandates a government study on social housing. Their definition of social housing emphasizes ownership by public agencies or nonprofits, below-market rents, eviction protections, and resident participation. They have diverged from market-based approaches to increasing the supply of housing, focusing instead on the root causes of the crisis: financialization and speculation, and aim to build a broad movement for housing justice, including labor unions.

In **Connecticut**, organizers have focused on pushing for safe, affordable, and democratically controlled housing, particularly in the face of rent hikes and hazardous living conditions. Their recent efforts have shifted towards envisioning social housing as a solution, marked by organizing tenant unions and pushing for resident-controlled management processes through collectively bargained leases. They are actively developing governance models for social housing, engaging key partners, and planning pilot projects while also working on long-term campaign strategies for widespread implementation and defining the environmental aspects of "green" social housing.

In **Illinois**, organizers are focused on advocating for green social housing as a core policy priority to address the intertwined crises of housing affordability, racial segregation, and environmental injustice in Illinois, particularly in Chicago. They aim to build a durable political base and mobilize support for zero-emission, mixed-income public housing that remains affordable and publicly owned in perpetuity. With recent electoral victories, such as the election of Mayor Johnson and a progressive city council, organizers are launching listening sessions to inform their advocacy for green social housing in Chicago, drawing on the city's history of resistance to environmental racism and privatization.

In **Maryland**, organizers employ a multifaceted approach to housing justice, emphasizing rent stabilization, tenant organizing, and advocacy for social housing. They prioritize legislative efforts at the city and county levels, aiming for policies like rent stabilization and just-cause eviction protections that benefit all residents, including undocumented individuals. Additionally, organizers' focus on tenant union organizing and community partnerships underscores their commitment to ensuring that social housing initiatives prioritize deeply affordable housing for those most in need, particularly immigrant and working-class communities.

In **New York**, organizers are leveraging the state's history of social housing initiatives to advocate for stronger protections and the expansion of social housing as a solution to the housing crisis. Campaigns focus on legislative changes at the city and state levels, including the creation of a New York State Social Housing Development Authority (SHDA) and policies enabling the conversion of existing private housing into social housing. Organizers also prioritize tenant protections and measures to make extractive housing models less viable, aiming to create a more favorable environment for social housing development and stewardship.

Organizers in **Rhode Island** are leveraging the state's escalating housing crisis to advocate for a long-term vision of social housing centered around a state-wide public developer. The public developer model, which has gained mainstream support, aims to ensure affordability through a mixed-income cross-subsidy approach, with at least 30% of residences reserved for low-income tenants. Organizers have garnered backing from progressive legislators, unions, and community development nonprofits, positioning the establishment of a public developer as a feasible solution to the housing crisis. Additionally, grassroots organizing efforts, such as establishing tenant unions, are crucial for building support and empowering low-income tenants to advocate for improved housing conditions and greater power in the long term.

In **Washington D.C.**, organizers have pursued social housing initiatives in response to extreme gentrification and displacement, building on the city's history of tenant protections. The Green New Deal for Housing Act, introduced in 2022, has garnered significant support from a coalition of progressive organizations and legislators, aiming to create publicly owned, permanently affordable housing with tenant oversight boards. Despite challenges such as mayoral opposition and Congressional interference, advocates remain committed to advancing social housing in D.C. through legislative efforts and community organizing.

At the **national level**, various organizations are fighting to push for social housing at the federal level and to help coordinate translocal organizing around decommodifying homes. Some national organizations are advocating for a national rent control model and \$1 trillion in federal funding for green social housing and administrative actions to support federal social housing investments, underscoring a vision for sweeping reform. They are also advocating for a renewal of public investment in public housing, as a form of social housing. Groups are also collaborating with grassroots organizations to amplify how social housing is a solution to the affordable housing crisis, aiming to shift the narrative from housing as a commodity to a human right.

## A DIVERSITY OF ARENAS: GRASSROOTS CONTESTATION, THE LEGISLATURE, AND THE BALLOT

Social housing campaigns across the country are rising up at the grassroots level, legislative, and electoral realms. Each of these arenas presents unique opportunities for building a diverse base of tenants, community members, and coalition partners that can form a formidable political bloc to demand the transformation of our current housing system.

In some places, organizers have opted to prioritize grassroots tenant organizing and direct contestation of property with private landlords or public landholders, to fight for social housing. They build power through such organizing, at times also wielding legal tools and impacting policy, often with a goal of acquiring and converting specific properties that residents occupy into social housing. Moms 4 Housing, a collective of unhoused mothers in Oakland, launched an occupation campaign that won the transfer of a vacant home owned by a corporate landlord to a community land trust. The Moms not only captured public imagination, but directed our national narrative to acknowledge that vacant properties vastly outnumber unhoused people.

In Connecticut, organizers have borrowed tactics from organized labor to launch building-level unions that can negotiate directly with their landlords for control, and demand tenant acquisition during future sales.

In Houston, organizers have formed tenant associations in LIHTC properties and are leveraging these organized bases of tenants to expose the problems caused by for-profit investors and to fight for better conditions. In Hyattsville, Maryland, immigrant renters formed a tenant union, went on an 18-month rent strike, and partook in a class action lawsuit; they won compensation and the transfer of their building's ownership to a more mission-driven landlord, who agreed to keep half the units affordable to low-income households. Through these direct grassroots fights for social housing, these groups aim to build larger bases and continue to grow their power to directly confront property owners and win resident control. The process of building and wielding tenant power also strengthens the muscle of community control that will be necessary to implement a vision of social housing, making it an essential ingredient for many of these campaigns.

Other campaigns have focused their sights on legislative action. In D.C. and New York, for example, organizers are working to form broad coalitions to push for legislation that would enable publicly-backed social housing to flourish. Legislative campaigns for social housing can be lightning rods to grow political coalitions and create political education opportunities for elected officials, the media, and the public. Even when unsuccessful, strong legislative campaigns can build and maintain lasting coalitions, keep elected champions in line and on message, and confront existing status-quo biases and real estate industry opposition against social housing and public investment. Different legislative campaigns for social housing chose different approaches based on local constraints and political terrain, but all efforts were rooted in long-term tenant organizing and coalition-building beyond the success or failure of any particular initiative, and beyond the political will of any particular elected official.

Some campaigns for social housing have opted for ballot measure campaigns, a logical terrain for social housing campaigns in cities and states where such initiatives are common, and especially where elected officials are hostile to social housing.

Measure ULA (Los Angeles) and Prop I (San Francisco) passed transfer taxes on sales of high-end real estate to fund existing and new social housing models, and in Kansas City, groups organized to pass a bond measure directly appropriating funds for permanently affordable housing.

Seattle's I-135 measure established a social housing development authority with future financing capacity. Ballot measures require a strong ground game, and these tactics too can be used to directly build awareness and power for social housing, and to show the popularity for policies that decommodify our homes.

In many cases, organizers see developing tenant unions and grassroots powerbuilding formations as the vehicle to win these large-scale transformations. Throughout these examples, we see how directly organizing tenants and unhoused people builds the power needed to win social housing, and how running legislative and ballot-based social housing campaigns can help build organized resident power. Organizations of unhoused people have led struggles for social housing and are increasingly uniting with tenant organizations to call for deeply affordable housing. Grassroots and political strategies compliment one another and often happen concurrently. Together, a combination of grassroots organizing, legislative and ballot measures are pushing the boundaries of our collective imagination and paving the way toward a flourishing multiracial movement for social housing across the country.



## SEEDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF STRUGGLE

One of today's central concerns is making sure that social housing is both deeply affordable and truly inclusive. Many existing models of social housing emphasize universality - that is, their ability to serve nearly everyone. But advocates worry, rightfully, that the neediest might be overlooked without a deliberate focus.

Pushing back on the idea that social housing needs to "break even" without additional ongoing subsidies, grassroots groups (such as CASA in Maryland) or national grassroots networks such as the Center for Popular Democracy have been fighting for policies and practices that prioritize the lowest of income brackets in social housing development. And to properly reach the people with the greatest need while having a solvent system has required creative thinking on sources of revenue for social housing. Measure ULA (Los Angeles) and Prop I (San Francisco) passed transfer taxes on sales of high-end real estate to fund existing and new social housing models. There are other conversations around the country, like a gentrifier tax, diverting funds from bloated police department budgets, or charging elite universities in urban areas property taxes as ways to resource social housing.

Another important concern for activists today is making sure that social housing is truly inclusive, centering not just tenants in the abstract but specifically the voice of impacted communities. And very specifically, campaigns are working on making sure that often excluded communities, such as immigrants and people with criminal records, are able to access social housing. CASA in Maryland, for example, sees how their campaigns for tenant unions and organizing for conversion of corporate-owned properties to community land trusts or cooperatives can help ensure immigrants' access to social housing. The Inland Community Land Trust, as part of its focus to advance social housing in the Inland Empire of California, has consistently prioritized challenging so-called 'crime free' ordinances, which permit or require eviction following a tenant's arrest—having widely disparate use and impact on Black residents.

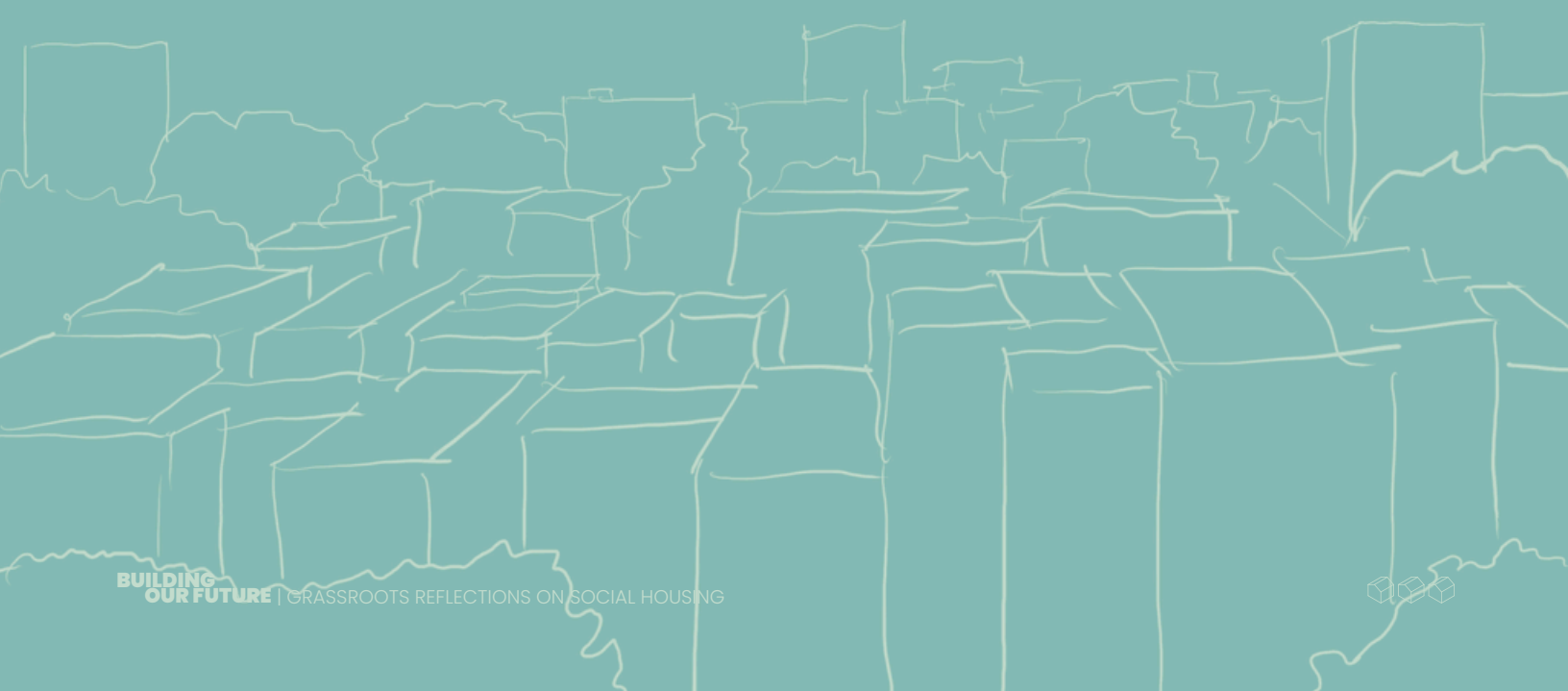
Finally, building power with tenants as a part of social housing campaigns is another important focus and innovation. No meaningful tenant control of social housing can exist without independent tenant organizations, as organizers in Kansas City Tenants Union and Connecticut Tenant Union have made clear in their work. Equally important is the role of unhoused and homeless people organizing, including to build power among vulnerable community members, and to reinforce that the solution to homelessness is guaranteed, dignified housing.

*This section was drafted by Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Shanti Singh with major contributions from Ruthy Gourevitch, Ameer Chew, and others on the core coordinating team.*



04

# WHAT COMES NEXT?

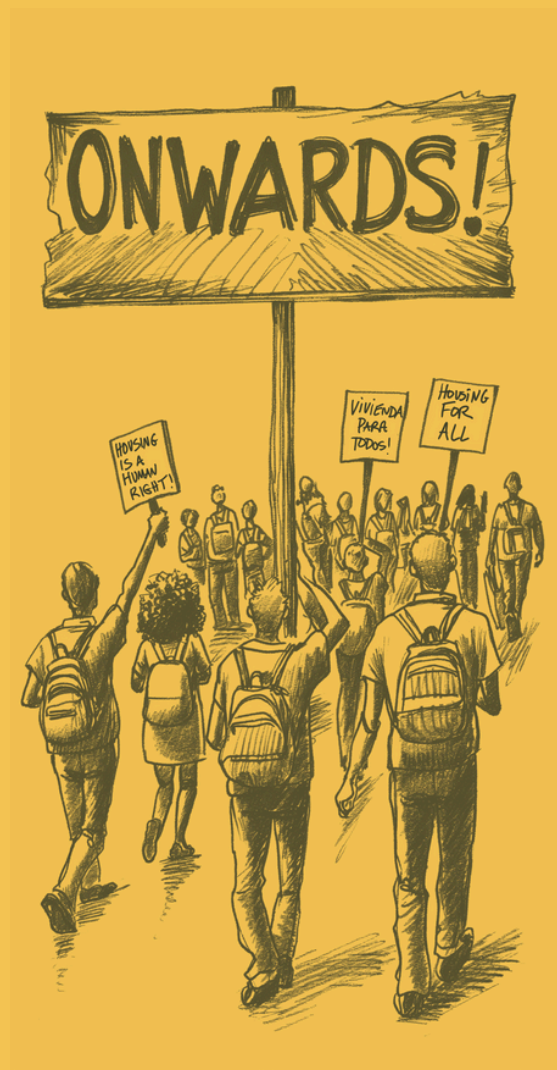


# WHAT COMES NEXT?

As we reflect on the findings and insights gathered, it is crucial to recognize again that this report represents just a fraction of the incredible grassroots efforts already underway across the country. It serves not as an exhaustive list, but rather as a catalyst for further dialogue, collaboration, and action. Moving forward, one of the key next steps is to continue amplifying the voices and campaigns both highlighted and not highlighted within this report, leveraging their successes and challenges to inspire and mobilize others. By sharing these stories widely, we can build momentum and solidarity, fostering an even more powerful nationwide movement for permanently affordable and dignified housing. Many groups leading social housing campaigns across the nation are already connected to regional, state and national housing coalition and networking spaces. The intent of this report was to capture, learn from, and begin dialogue and build connections between more localized social housing movements across the country.

In the spirit of grassroots organizing, the next phase of our work must prioritize continued engagement and support for communities on the front lines of the housing crisis, who are most deeply impacted by it. This means fostering spaces for mutual learning and collaboration, where organizers and residents can come together to share strategies, resources, and experiences. To that end, we intend to hold a convening later in 2024 to continue building these networks of solidarity and where we can strengthen our collective impact to confront profiteering and financialization and its role in housing insecurity. We anticipate further discussing the takeaways, learnings and next steps of how to support a growing movement of social housing in the country.

This report is not simply a documentation of past achievements, but a call to action for all those committed to the pursuit of housing justice. It reminds us of the power of grassroots organizing and the importance of centering the voices of impacted communities in our efforts. Together, through continued organizing, engagement, and mutual support, we can create lasting change and make real—and permanent—the idea of housing as a fundamental human right for all.





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Kumar Rao served as principal editor and project manager of this report, and Gabriel Hernández-Solano was its designer and illustrator.



# CONTRIBUTORS



# BUILDING OUR FUTURE

grassroots reflections on **social housing**

