

Ensuring

Safe and Affordable Housing

Issues and Options Brief
(November 2008)

THE ISSUES

- **Lack of adequate income is a principal barrier to families having stable housing.** Average rents nationwide have grown faster than inflation, while the income of renters has declined. (*Making Work Pay Enough*, G. Acs and M. A. Turner, The Urban Institute, July 2008.) For the average American, wages from *three* full-time minimum-wage jobs are required in order to afford a market rent for a two-bedroom apartment. (*Out of Reach 2007-2008*, National Low-Income Housing Coalition.)
- **Stable, affordable housing increases other opportunities.** Welfare recipients who had housing help had higher employment rates and incomes than those without it. (*Housing America's Low-Income Families*, www.urban.org/toolkit/issues/housing.cfm.)
- **Homeownership has historically been the surest path to family economic success.** A home purchase is the largest single investment most people make. Notwithstanding the current housing crisis, owning a home increases family stability and long-term financial security, and represents an asset to be passed to the next generation. (*Strengthening the Ladder for Sustainable Homeownership*, National Housing Conference, February 2005.)
- **Substandard housing is a public health issue.** Substandard housing can trigger asthma attacks, increase childhood lead poisoning, and result in greater rates of injury—all of which affect healthcare costs. (*Why Place Matters: Building a Movement for Healthy Communities*, PolicyLink, 2007.)

THE DATA

- **“Worst case” housing needs are increasing.** The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines “worst case needs” as households that either pay more than half of their income for housing (“severe rent burden”) or live in severely substandard housing. There were almost 6 million U.S. households with “worst case” housing needs in 2005—an increase of 817,000 households since 2003. (*Affordable Housing Needs 2005: Report to Congress*, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, May 2007.)
- **Homelessness is a continuing crisis.** The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that as many as 434,000 homeless Americans were in shelters, and an additional 338,781 were unsheltered in a given period in 2005 (the most recent year for which data are available). (*The Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress [AHAR]*, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, February 2007.)
- **Veterans, children, the disabled, and people of color are disproportionately vulnerable to being homeless.** About 59% of the sheltered homeless are people of color; 25% are disabled; 23% are children; and 19% are veterans. (AHAR, cited above.)
- **Lack of safe, affordable housing forces children and their families into long shelter stays.** A survey on homelessness in major U.S. cities revealed that the average length of stay at a shelter was 5.7 months for households with children; the longest average stay in this group was 18 months. (*U.S. Conference of Mayors 2007 Status Report on Hunger & Homelessness*, December 2007.)
- **Disparities in home ownership continue.** While 72 percent of Whites are homeowners, only 49.7 percent of Hispanics/Latinos and 47.2 percent of Blacks own their homes (www.census.gov).

OPTIONS FOR PHILANTHROPY

- **Underwrite local collaborative efforts to increase the number of safe, affordable housing units.** Support initiatives by local governments, community development corporations, housing advocates, resident groups and other stakeholders that increase the number and quality of affordable housing units. Such efforts include: advocacy for an inclusionary housing framework that encourages developers of market rate housing to develop a specified number of units that are affordable to low- and moderate-income buyers; enforcement of local housing codes and increased prosecution of violations; and funding for Community Land Trusts or other shared-equity housing programs. (*Delivering on the Promise of Inclusionary Housing: Best Practices in Administration and Monitoring*, PolicyLink, 2007; www.cltnetwork.org.)
- **Promote promising practices for low-income working families to keep their homes.** The foreclosure crisis, home equity scams, skyrocketing utility costs, and financial hardship can threaten homeownership. Groups like the National Consumer Law Center provide housing advocates, service organizations and homeowners with information and assistance so that low-income families retain their most important source of wealth (www.consumerlaw.org).
- **Increase public education about other benefits available to low-income families.** Not all families are aware of and take full advantage of benefits to which they are entitled, which can supplement their resources and improve their ability to cover their housing costs. These include the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Food Stamp Program, Medicaid, the Childcare Tax Credit, and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program. (*Making Work Pay Enough*, G. Acs and M. A. Turner, The Urban Institute, 2008; www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap.)
- **Support advocacy and public education about homeownership programs for low-income families.** Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), through which the savings of low-income families are matched and can be used to purchase a home, represent a promising strategy to increase homeownership among low-income households (www.cfed.org).

KEY RESOURCES

National Low-Income Housing Coalition. Works to increase federal policymakers' knowledge of low-income housing issues; preserve existing federally-assisted housing and resources; and expand federal investment in low-income housing. Its *2008 Advocates' Guide* provides advocates, policymakers, and others with information on housing and housing program issues, as well as information on the community planning process (www.nlihc.org).

PolicyLink. This organization's Equitable Development Toolkit offers strategies to create affordable housing through regional policies that promote neighborhood stability and equity (www.policylink.org).

Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Foundation's Family Economic Success strategy approaches homeownership in the broader context of family asset-building and offers an array of interconnected resources and ideas on long-term family wealth building (www.aecf.org).

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD's Office of Community Planning and Development provides critical information about affordable housing development and assistance for Americans who are homeless (www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/).

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Family Funders Network
Strengthening Vulnerable Families