



“...A stranger and you invited me in”

Affordable Housing Advocacy for Presbyterians

By Erin Hoekstra, Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow

Housing is defined as “affordable” when individuals and families spend no more than 30% of their income on housing costs. For low-income people who live on less than median income, it is both more difficult and more necessary to have access to affordable housing, because of their limited budgets and the high costs of housing.

Unfortunately, the United States faces a shortage of affordable rental housing, and therefore, low-income people have to pay up to 75% of their income on rent. *Severe cost burden* refers to rents above 50% of income while *moderate cost burden* is between 30% and 50% of income. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition’s “Low Income Housing Profile,” in 1999, over half of renter households had either moderate or severe housing problems, including moderate or severe cost burdens and inadequate housing conditions. Of the almost eight million low-income people suffering from severe housing problems, 1.7 million of these were very low-income people living in subsidized housing. In the same year, of the 9.3 million people with moderate housing problems, 80% of them were low-income people.

The 210th General Assembly “*call[s] upon Presbyterian churches to work with policy makers to create fair and just economic and housing policies, and to create funding to implement those policies, which will benefit every citizen of this nation, including the poor and homeless.*” (Minutes, 1998, p. 683)

This affordable housing advocacy resource seeks to equip you with tools to better advocate with policy makers to fund government programs to house “the least of these” among us. “The least of these” in terms of housing are those people who must live in shelters or on the streets, as well as those who live ‘doubled-up’ with friends or family and those who live in substandard housing that jeopardizes their health, safety, and well-being.

What does Social Witness Policy say about advocacy for affordable housing?

The 201st General Assembly encouraged Presbyterians to advocate for public policy that will:

“-fund acquisition and construction of housing by community development corporations and other non-profit groups;

-develop new public and public-private initiatives that will increase the availability and affordability of housing for low- and moderate-income people, with a focus on long-term solution;

-prevent the displacement of low-income tenants from subsidized housing;

-stop the demolition and sale of public housing and fund full operating subsidies and capital grants for modernization and rehabilitation of public housing;...and

-call for the full funding of legislation for emergency food and shelter efforts, rehabilitation of buildings for shelters, and transitional housing for families with children.”

(Minutes, 1989, pp.521-522)

Presbyterian Church (USA) Washington Office
100 Maryland Avenue, NE #410, Washington, DC 20002
Phone: 202-543-1126 www.pcusa.org/washington

Links between Housing and Wages

According to the Joint Center on Housing Studies at Harvard University, housing costs have increased more rapidly than wages. Therefore, low-income people have had to pay an increasing amount of their income toward housing costs, leaving less money left over for food and the other basic necessities of life. There is no place in this nation where a person can work full time at minimum wage and afford housing, nor is there enough affordable housing for the low-income people who need it (*Out of Reach*, National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2004, <http://nlihc.org/oor2004/>).

The federal minimum wage is set at \$5.15 and has remained the same since 1997. According to the AFL-CIO, the current minimum wage has 26% less purchasing power than it had in 1979 and is actually valued at about \$4.42. A worker who earns minimum wage makes just \$10,712 per year, which is over \$5,000 below the poverty level for a family of three. Currently, hardworking people are putting in a full week's work and still qualify for government programs like welfare and Section 8 because they are only earning minimum wage.

The "housing wage" is the amount of money that a worker must earn per hour in order to afford housing in the locality in

which they live. The current average national housing wage is \$15.37 for a two-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent. Fair Market Rents (FMR), gross rent estimates that include cost of utilities, are set at the fortieth percentile rent for a specific area. With an average housing wage of \$15.37, a worker must earn almost triple the federal minimum wage in order to afford housing in the United States, or alternately, a worker must work almost 120 hours per week (three full-time minimum wage jobs) in order to afford housing.

For more information:

Joint Center on Housing Studies,
www.jchs.harvard.edu
Department of Housing and Urban Development,
www.hud.gov
National Low Income Housing Coalition,
www.nlihc.org
National Council of Churches' Let Justice Roll
Campaign, www.nccusa.org/letjusticeroll.html

Links between Housing and Hunger

Housing and utility costs are fixed elements of a person's monthly budgetary costs. The rising costs of housing take increasingly larger percentages of household budgets, leaving less and less left over for things like food, medicine, and child care.

Food insecurity refers to "the lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. There are different levels of food insecurity." (Food Research and Action Center, *Hunger in the U.S.*) This definition of food insecurity includes behaviors like skipping meals, cutting down on the amount of food eaten, or going to bed hungry because of the lack of food.

High housing costs contribute to food insecurity because housing costs, as well as things like child care, are inflexible items in the budget. Families and individuals must make difficult choices of how to allocate limited budgets, and one of the only "flexible" expenses in a monthly budget is food. Thus, they may have to focus on quantity over quality of food, skip or cut down meals, or turn to food banks or community kitchens in order to have enough food to eat during the month. Many low-income families must cut food costs in order to

make ends meet. Thus, the increasingly high cost of housing perpetuates the strain on the emergency food system and federal food programs, like food stamps, to provide adequate and nutritious diets to low-income people who are extremely cost-burdened by monthly housing expenses.

For more information:

Presbyterian Hunger Program,
<http://www.pcusa.org/hunger/index.htm>
Presbyterian Church USA Urban Ministries,
<http://www.pcusa.org/evangelism/churchdevelopment/um>
Food Research and Action Center, www.frac.org
Center on Poverty and Hunger at Brandeis
University, www.centeronhunger.org
Bread for the World, www.bread.org

Federal Housing Programs

Housing Voucher Program (Section 8)

The Housing Voucher Program, or Section 8, pays the difference between 30% of a low-income person's rent and modest area rent so that extremely low-income families and individuals can afford a place to live. Currently, the program serves around two million people. There are several types of vouchers in the program, including:

Project-based vouchers- These vouchers are attached to specific units in a building, and the housing authority assigns eligible families and individuals to those units, usually from a waiting list. When the tenant leaves, another tenant is assigned to that unit, and the voucher status remains with the unit.

Tenant-based vouchers- These vouchers are assigned to families and individuals who then look for a property owner to accept the voucher. The housing authority contracts with that owner. If the tenant decides to move, he/she retains the voucher and may use it to find housing elsewhere.

Community Development Block Grants

CDBG is a federal program aimed at creating viable communities by providing funds to improve housing, the living environment, and economic opportunities, principally for persons with low and moderate incomes. The program was created to address the critical social, economic and environmental problems faced by the country's cities, towns, and smaller urban communities.

Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) provides federal funds to help low-income people pay for heating and/or cooling their homes. The program is implemented by state-based organizations like public housing authorities. These funds can be used to assist in bill payment, energy crisis assistance, and weatherization or energy-efficient home repairs.

Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA)

People with AIDS are at increased risk of losing housing due to the high cost of medical care and the difficulty of maintaining a job while managing the disease. Housing is especially important for people with AIDS because of the connections between housing and health. In addition to providing assistance with housing, HOPWA funds can also be used to provide supportive services to people with AIDS.

Emergency Food and Shelter Program allocates federal funds to meet the needs of hungry and/or homeless people during economic downturn by providing meals and rent, mortgage, or utility assistance.

Low Income Housing Tax Credit offers investors in low-income housing developments a dollar-for-dollar reduction in federal tax liability and drives almost half of all new affordable housing production.

Rural Housing and Economic Development provides federal grant money to comprehensive community development efforts around the housing and economic development needs that are unique to rural communities.

McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Grants serve over 700,000 of the estimated 3.5 million homeless individuals by providing money for emergency shelter, transitional housing, and sometimes permanent housing. In addition, the program provides funding for outreach and supportive services.

Hope VI provides government grants to local public housing authorities for the rehabilitation of existing but severely distressed public housing units or the demolition and construction of new housing units. Ideally, HOPE VI is supposed to provide new or revitalized housing to the former tenants of the program and grant them access to better jobs and schools. Unfortunately, many new developments do not have a one-to-one replacement ratio and many low-income families are displaced as a result of redevelopment.

For more information:

National Low Income Housing Coalition,

www.nlihc.org

Department of Housing and Urban Development, www.hud.gov

Programs at Risk in 2006 Budget

Overall, the HUD budget in the President's proposal for Fiscal Year 2006 was cut by just over \$5 billion, which comprises a 14.2% cut to 2005 funding levels. The budgetary descriptions below are from the President's proposed budget and are subject to congressional action and adjustment. For updates on congressional action, go to www.nlihc.org.

Section 811- Disabled Housing

The current federal budget proposes almost a 50% cut in funding for housing for people with disabilities, from last year's \$239 million, to \$120 million. Additionally, funds would be limited to rental assistance and would discontinue construction of additional units of housing for people with disabilities.

Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)

The FY 2006 federal budget proposes to consolidate the Community Development Block Grant program, the **Rural Housing and Economic Development** program (which provides housing assistance funds to entities such as Indian tribes and local rural community development corporations), and 17 other federal programs in a new initiative called the "Strengthening America's Communities Block Grant Program." Last year, the CDBG program received \$4.7 billion, and the proposed new initiative would include 19 programs funded at only \$3.7 billion. Thus, CDBG and the Rural Housing and Economic Development program would effectively be eliminated as programs. About 25% of the CDBG budget, roughly \$1 billion per year, is spent specifically for affordable housing while the rest provides urban communities with important revitalization efforts.

Fair Housing Assistance Program and Fair Housing Initiatives Program These programs, which are used to investigate and resolve instances of housing discrimination on both the federal and local levels, are cut by \$10 million and \$4 million respectively, lowering their budgets to \$16 million each.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants will receive almost a \$200 million increase, topping it off at \$1.415 billion. Of this increase, though, \$25 million will be designated for the new Faith-Based Prisoner Re-entry program through the Department of Labor as well as \$200 million to fund the proposed "Samaritan Initiative" which would target funding to house the "chronic homeless" population.

Housing Opportunities for People with AIDS (HOPWA)

Already suffering from a \$13 million cut in FY 2005, the budget proposes a \$14 million this year, lowering funding levels from \$282 million to \$268 million. This cut coincides with a doubling of the areas eligible to apply for funding. Although less funds overall will be available, 124 jurisdictions (instead of last

year's 62) will be competing for funding.

HOPE VI The Administration has proposed completely defunding and dismantling HOPE VI, the program which allows for the redevelopment and revitalization of the most severely distressed affordable housing in the nation, though it received \$143 million last year.

The Section 8 Scapegoat

The Housing Choice Voucher, or Section 8, Program subsidizes the rent of extremely low-income people so that they can afford housing. (See page three for more details about the program.) Because the cost of the program proportionately increases as market rental housing costs rise, the Section 8 budget has been growing and currently represents 57% of the overall HUD budget.

Because of the cost of the program, Section 8 has become a scapegoat for the other HUD program budget cuts. The State and Local Flexibility Act has been proposed to try to contain these costs. Among other things, it drastically changes the income targeting of the Section 8 program from the poorest people among us to people who make a higher percentage of the area median income. Refer to www.nlihc.org for more information.

Housing Advocacy 101

How to Advocate on the Local Level:

The following suggestions are ways that the 201st General Assembly of the PC(USA) called on congregations and presbyteries to advocate for housing needs in their local areas.

Evaluate the housing needs in their area.

Tour a public housing facility. If you have connections with local officials, invite them along with the group.

Explore how resources, including investment funds and property, can be utilized to support the development of affordable, suitable housing for low- and moderate-income people.

Consider becoming a nonprofit sponsor of subsidized housing. Volunteer to monitor the upkeep of an affordable housing complex. Work towards integrating supportive services such as transportation, child care, and food stamp outreach with housing.

Work with community and statewide coalitions and with other churches that are addressing the housing crisis in their area. Many local areas have either ecumenical, interfaith, or secular organizations that work with affordable housing issues. Send a member of your congregation to their meetings to report back to the congregation. Send a member of your congregation to an affordable housing conference. Have a local affordable housing advocate speak to an adult education class or lead a workshop at your church.

Examine zoning ordinances and real estate practices in their communities that affect low-income and racial ethnic people. Combat “red-lining” and other real estate practices that perpetuate segregated communities and keep hardworking people from accessing housing.

Encourage your members to participate in local low-income energy-assistance programs. LIHEAP is the federal energy-assistance program that is administered at the

local level. Find out how the local organization in your area distributes it and develop a relationship with that organization.

Consider developing long-term housing units with participation of other nonprofit entities. Many churches are donating or developing land into affordable housing complexes in partnership with a local nonprofit.

Assist with temporary shelter for homeless people, while seeking permanent solutions to the problems. Participate in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, in which churches take turns housing local homeless families for a week.

(Items quoted from *Minutes*, 1989, p.522)

What are Presbyterians doing?

Lake View Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Illinois, has formed a group called the Lake View Presbyterian Church Affordable Housing Task Force, which has hosted an educational series at the church, planned an Affordable Housing Sunday service, and become involved in local advocacy efforts on affordable housing issues.

The goals and objectives of the Task Force include educating the congregation on affordable housing issues and “facilitat[ing] action to preserve and create affordable housing locally, statewide, and nationally.” The Task Force is working toward these goals by engaging in activities such as creating an action alert system that keeps interested members of the church informed of urgent affordable housing issues as well as letter-writing and call-in campaigns to local leaders.

For more information about the Task Force, refer to www.lakeviewpresbyterian.org/lvpc_sj_ahtf.htm.

How to Advocate on the State and Federal Levels:

Not many politicians are talking about housing and homelessness issues. As people of faith and people concerned about “the least of these” among us, we can use our influence as voting citizens to reframe the political debate. Before engaging in these advocacy efforts, be sure to consult the “Do’s and Don’ts for Congregations During Election Times” which is located on the PC(USA) Washington Office website at <http://pcusa.org/washington/christiancitizen/do-dont.htm>.

Educate yourself and your congregation on how to be effective advocates as people of faith. Use the Christian & Citizen “Christians and Government” guide at an adult education class or in a Bible study setting. It can be accessed on the website at <http://www.pcusa.org/washington/christiancitizen/fivesession.pdf>. In addition, the Washington Office offers a resource on advocacy called “How to be an Effective Advocate,” available at <http://www.pcusa.org/washington/christiancitizen/effectiveadvocate.pdf>.

Sign up for the Washington Office’s E-Serve and action updates. The Washington Office periodically sends out E-Serves that cover specific issue networks, including Hunger and Human Needs, Health Care, Women and Families, and Civil Rights and Religious Liberties. To subscribe to the E-Serves, you may sign up at <http://capwiz.com/pcusa/mlm/signup/>. To take action through the Presbyterian Legislative Action Center, check out <http://capwiz.com/pcusa/home/>

Organize a letter-writing campaign. Get a group of people together and educate each other about pending state and federal legislation. Write brief letters to your senators and representatives stating your position on the issue and asking for specific action. Use your letter to educate and persuade your state and federal elected officials.

Coordinate a call-in day. If a vote is imminent on a particular piece of legislation, hold a call-in day, encouraging people to register their opinions with their legislators. The Capitol switchboard number is 202-224-3121.

During an election time, host a local candidate forum at your church. Invite candidates to your church for a non-partisan discussion. Raise the issues of hunger, poverty, and housing in order to make politicians talk about them. Refer to <http://www.pcusa.org/washington/christiancitizen/candidate.htm> for more information.

Work on local minimum wage campaigns. In no locality in this country can a person working a full-time minimum wage job afford housing! In many states and localities across the country, faith groups are advocating for an increase in the minimum wage as a way to combat hunger, homelessness, and poverty. For information about the connection between housing and wages, read the National Low Income Housing Coalition’s annual report *Out of Reach* at www.nlihc.org.

What are Presbyterians doing?

On the second Tuesday of every month that Congress is in session, the PC(USA) Washington Office hosts **Second Tuesday** briefings. It is a time for the Washington Office staff to brief the attendees on current policy issues related to topics that the General Assembly has addressed.

Following the Second Tuesday briefing, Presbyterians usually meet with their members of Congress and/or their staff to advocate for these policies and to encourage them to create just and compassionate policies that address the needs and concerns of the “least of these” among us.

Members of the National Capital, Baltimore, and Philadelphia Presbyteries regularly attend Second Tuesday. For more information, contact Sherry Giles at sgiles@ctr.pcusa.org or call 202-543-1126.

What is the PC(USA) doing? *Potential Legislative Solutions*

The Presbyterian Church (USA) as a denomination has endorsed the **National Housing Trust Fund**, a distinct fund that would generate additional dollars to be specifically used to address the affordable housing shortage in this country. The Trust Fund would provide a dedicated funding source to address affordable housing needs. These funds would be used to **construct, rehabilitate, and preserve 1.5 million units of affordable housing** in the United States in a decade.

Already 350 localities, including 36 states, have established their own housing trust funds to address the housing needs that they are experiencing on a local level. These funds are mainly **targeted for use in rental housing and for extremely low income people** who live at 30% of the area median income.

In addition to the denominational endorsement, Rev. Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, has joined with a large interfaith group of religious leaders from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist faiths in supporting the National Housing Trust Fund Campaign.

The Trust Fund already has almost 5500 supporters, but it can't have too many! Eleven congregations and presbyteries of the PC(USA) are among the list of local, state, and national organizations, elected officials, and faith organizations that have endorsed the campaign. This list can be accessed according to state at <http://www.nhtf.org/endorsers/default.asp> In addition, the PC(USA) Washington Office is actively working to promote the housing trust fund. For more information about the details of the National Housing Trust Fund and for endorsement information, refer to the website www.nhtf.org.

What are Presbyterians doing?

Presbyterians from the Presbytery of Philadelphia have been involved in the Raise the Minimum Wage Coalition, a diverse coalition of labor, faith, and community-based groups. The Coalition is focused on statewide advocacy efforts to raise the minimum wage for workers in Pennsylvania.

Currently, the minimum wage in Pennsylvania is \$5.15 per hour, but several bills in the state legislature propose to raise it. The Raise the Minimum Wage Coalition is advocating for the highest proposed increase of \$2.00, thus raising the minimum wage incrementally to \$7.15 per hour by 2007.

The Coalition has organized local and statewide rallies to create the political will to raise the minimum wage in Pennsylvania. On May 25, the group organized a rally in Philadelphia for a raise in the minimum wage and on June 22 hosted a statewide rally and advocacy day in Harrisburg. Presbyterians from the Presbytery of Philadelphia are integrally involved in the Coalition, and the Social Justice Resource Team of the Presbytery has selected increasing the minimum wage as one of its key areas of focus.

For more information:

Christian & Citizen Resource of the PC(USA), Washington Office,
www.pcusa.org/washington/christiancitizen.htm

Opening Doors for Affordable Housing of the Wisconsin Council of Churches,
www.wichurches.org/housing.html

2005 Advocates' Guide to Housing and Community Development Policy of the National Low Income **Housing Coalition**, www.nlihc.org/advocates/index.htm

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, www.cbpp.org/pubs/housing.htm

State of the Nation's Housing 2005 of the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University,
<http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/publications/markets/son2005/son2005.pdf>