

PUBLIC HOUSING

A Central Pillar of Social Housing

Social housing encompasses housing initiatives funded and operated under public auspices, and designed to provide affordable, stable, and secure living conditions for all — including low income households. Unlike market-driven housing, social housing is not rooted in creating profit but rather in serving the public good by ensuring that basic human needs for shelter are met within a framework of equity and communal welfare. 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.

Despite its critical role in our country's housing system, public housing has been experiencing a crisis driven by over 50 years of systemic underfunding — a condition thoroughly intertwined with structural racism. The federal government's massive cuts to social services, the chronic under-funding of public housing maintenance, the increasing criminalization of public housing residents, and the shift from expansion to demolition of public housing — despite the growing need for deeply affordable housing — are the chief causes of worsening conditions. This targeted neglect stems, in part, from the historic misuse of public housing as a tool to segregate low-income Black families, obscuring the value of the program as a means of providing social housing. More recently, the neglect and demolition of public housing has resulted in the involuntary displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents who are disproportionately people of color, disabled people, elderly households, and families with children.¹ Displaced families generally end up with worse housing outcomes and are relegated to areas with fewer economic, educational, and social opportunities. Often, the difficulty of accessing deeply subsidized replacement housing means that displaced families are more likely to experience homelessness.²

AHJ believes that standing up a federal social housing initiative means prioritizing the preservation of public housing and supporting its residents, as well as strengthening and improving the existing public housing program for a sustainable and resilient future.



¹ Milena Almagro, Eric Chyn and Bryan Stuart "Urban Renewal and Inequality: Evidence from Chicago's Public Housing Demolitions" (September 2023).

² Vince Reina and Ben Winter, "Safety Net? The Utility of Vouchers When a Place-Based Rental Subsidy Ends," (May 10, 2016).

PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL HOUSING

The Alliance for Housing Justice (AHJ) defines social housing as:

- Owned by a public entity or by a mission-driven nonprofit organization
- Permanently unavailable to be sold for profit, keeping human need above the profit-seeking interests of corporations
- Permanently affordable, and deeply affordable to those most in need
- Under resident and/or community control
- Anti-racist and equitable
- Sustainable
- High-quality and accessible
- Accompanied by strong tenant rights and protections

Beyond just providing housing, social housing also integrates services and amenities that contribute to a higher quality of life. This includes access to transportation, green spaces, childcare, healthcare, employment, and quality schools, which are often missing from existing public housing communities.

The most well-known social housing in the United States is our 87-year-old public housing system

The blueprint for social housing includes a variety of housing models. It includes publicly owned housing, non-profit-owned housing, mixed income developments, limited equity homeownership, community land trusts, tenant cooperatives, and any number of other creative structures that adhere to the basic principles listed above. Through this varied approach, social housing can be a flexible, responsive, and inclusive housing system that not only addresses the most immediate need for affordable housing but also achieves a scale where housing is decommodified for a majority of residents. Together, these models contribute to the creation

of sustainable and cohesive communities where everyone has access to a home that is affordable, secure, and conducive to their well-being.

PUBLIC HOUSING'S ROLE IN SOCIAL HOUSING

The purpose and requirements of public housing embody many of the core principles of AHJ's social housing goals and underscore the importance of government investment and public control. It offers a foundational model for creating sustainable housing on public land that is deeply affordable for all, even the lowest-income households. Public housing, when sufficiently resourced, 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.³ 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 AHJ's 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



³ Tram Hoang, Rasheedah Phillips, Jasmine Rangel, "[Grounding Justice: Toward Reparative Spatial Futures in Land and Housing](#)," (reparative spatial justice involves at a minimum: public recognition, material redistribution, and social and spatial transformation of local ecosystems to create democratic, participatory spaces for dialogue, education, and cultural production that is non-extractive, redistributive, capacity-building, and advances participatory democracy, community control, racial equity, and environmentally just future).

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. Recognizing the intrinsic value of public housing, this vision seeks to enhance, expand, improve, and refine its underlying principles and practices. This inclusive approach highlights the expansive nature of social housing, illustrating how it builds upon and enhances the concept of public housing. With its focus on permanent affordability, resident control, and protection from market pressures, social housing stands out as a more holistic and equitable approach to housing.

FEDERAL POLICY FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

The federal government has a crucial role to play in promoting the general welfare of the nation by addressing the acute shortage of decent, safe, and affordable homes for all citizens, especially low-income families. To address today's social housing needs, new federal investment and policy commitments are necessary to remedy the decades of systemic disinvestment and intentional marginalization of public housing; to preserve, modernize, and expand the existing supply for future generations; and to invest in new, sustainable models.

All new federal social housing proposals must expressly center our existing public housing and its residents and ensure that public housing's important features, including permanent and deep affordability, permanent decommunification, tenant protections, and resident voice in management, are consistently reflected and incorporated in all new social housing proposals. The following policies are reflective of these values:

- \$1 trillion in new direct federal funding to create 12 million deeply and permanently affordable homes in the form of social housing that includes public housing; in addition, at least \$180 billion to immediately address the public housing repair backlog;
- Repeal of the Faircloth Amendment to allow for the building of additional public housing units;
- Green New Deal for Public Housing investments in the climate resilience, energy efficiency, and accessibility of existing public housing;
- A federal Social Housing Development Authority in order to carry out property and land acquisition for a robust social housing future; and
- An Office of Social Housing within HUD to align public housing, other HUD-assisted housing, and new models of social housing

For additional information and a thorough history of the history of public housing in the U.S., please see [“Social Housing for All: A Vision for Thriving Communities, Renter Power and Racial Justice,”](#) co-produced by the Center for Popular Democracy and Renters Rising.

