

TENANT

TALK

SPRING 2024 | VOLUME 15, ISSUE 1

The Resilient Work of Tenants:

Past

Present

Future



Dear NLIHC Partners, Friends, Allies, and Supporters,
NLIHC celebrates our 50-year anniversary in 2024! Since being founded by Cushing Dolbeare in 1974, NLIHC has educated, organized, and advocated to ensure that people with the lowest incomes have access to decent, accessible, affordable housing. Throughout 2024, we are recognizing our 50th anniversary by looking back on our history and collective achievements, while also renewing our commitment to achieving housing justice.

Though much has changed in the past 50 years, our priorities remain much the same: bridging the gap between incomes and housing costs through rental assistance; expanding and preserving the supply of affordable rental homes; stabilizing low-income families and preventing evictions; and strengthening and enforcing renter protections. Join us this year in celebrating NLIHC's 50th anniversary by renewing your own commitment to our shared goal of achieving racially and socially equitable public policy that ensures people with the lowest incomes have quality homes that are accessible and affordable in communities of their choice.

Onward.



Diane Yentel
NLIHC President and CEO



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ABOUT TENANT TALK

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ABOUT NLIHC

The National Low Income Housing Coalition is dedicated to achieving racially and socially equitable public policy that ensures people with the lowest incomes have quality homes that are accessible and affordable in communities of their choice.

A key part of our work is public education and engagement. NLIHC is committed to sharing resources and tools that help individuals become informed advocates. *Tenant Talk* is one of the many resources we provide to the public.

BECOME A MEMBER

NLIHC relies heavily on the support of our members to fund our work and to guide our policy decisions. Members are our strength! Hundreds of low-income residents and resident organizations have joined the NLIHC community by becoming members.

We suggest an annual membership rate of only \$5 for a low-income individual membership, and \$15 for a low-income resident organization. Please consider becoming a member of NLIHC today at nlihc.org/membership.

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Dear Readers

We are thrilled to introduce this new issue of *Tenant Talk* on behalf of NLIHC's board and staff. For decades, tenant organizers in this country have fiercely advocated to secure rights for tenants. The history of housing in the U.S. has been shaped by institutionalized racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination. However, as strikes from the early [twentieth century](#), through the [1970s](#), and into the modern era remind us, tenant organizers have always showed up and pushed progress forward. In this issue of *Tenant Talk*, we highlight the successes and challenges of tenant organizing and celebrate the resilience of those advocates who have struggled to ensure the right to accessible and affordable homes.

Recent history shows that tenants have the power to move the needle on housing policy. During the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), widespread job losses left millions of renter households behind on rent and threatened to bring about a nationwide eviction crisis. In response, NLIHC and advocates across the country persuaded Congress to make available an historic \$46.5 billion in emergency rental assistance and convinced the administration to implement a temporary national eviction moratorium, protecting the housing stability of extremely low-income renters everywhere. During the same period, more than 200 new state and local tenant protections were passed, strengthening housing security for those most threatened with eviction.

None of these wins would have been possible without the leadership of tenants. Day after day, tenants stepped up, attending community meetings, bringing issues to advocates and organizers, and raising their voices to expand and enforce their rights. The stories collected in this issue of *Tenant Talk* highlight the hard work of those tenants who have fought for their communities and contributed to strengthening the movement for housing justice.

Leaders with lived experience have been integral to these efforts, as shown by the successes of NLIHC's "Collective," a group of dedicated tenant and community leaders with lived experience of housing insecurity who work to advance housing and racial justice in their communities. The group's members meet regularly to discuss their goals and visions for achieving housing justice and identify effective ways to engage their communities. They also work with NLIHC staff to brainstorm methods for making NLIHC more inclusive, including through a "Tenant Leader Session" held during NLIHC's annual Housing Policy Forum. In addition to working as organizers in their states, they have advocated for tenant protections at the federal level. In 2022, for example, members of the Collective's first cohort met with officials in the [Biden-Harris administration](#) to inform the development of tenant protection policies.

These are just some of the more recent examples of successful tenant-led organizing, of course. In fact, the legacy of tenant organizing in the U.S. extends back for decades, as this new issue of *Tenant Talk* reminds us. As always, readers will hear directly from individuals with lived experience of housing insecurity, because housing justice will never be realized without involving the voices of those most impacted. We believe that this new issue of *Tenant Talk* shows just how central these voices are to the struggle to build a just and equitable future for all tenants.

In Solidarity,
The Editorial Board



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Introduction



By Evan Martinez, Formerly of NLIHC

NLIHC celebrates our 50th anniversary this year, and from the very beginning, our efforts to ensure affordable and accessible housing for people with the lowest incomes have been driven by residents and tenant organizers. Founded in 1974, NLIHC was meant from the outset to serve as a hub for low-income housing advocates interested in learning about federal housing programs, policies, and advocacy. The first board of the Low Income Housing Information Service (LIHIS) – one of our constituent organizations in those early days – was comprised of low-income people, and its first chair was Tony Henry, a tenant organizer from Philadelphia. Today, tenant organizers in NLIHC’s network continue to play a central role in our activities, participating in federal advocacy, sitting on our board, and advising NLIHC about how to make our practices, events, and policy priorities more relevant to all our members.

Tenant organizing has always been the bedrock of housing justice. From tenement organizing in industrial cities during the late nineteenth century to present efforts to prevent displacement and evictions, tenant organizers have always stood up to advance housing justice. In this edition of *Tenant Talk*, we explore the long history and the current state of tenant organizing in the U.S. You’ll hear from those with decades of experience, as well as youth advocates new to the movement. You’ll encounter stories of tenants organizing on the local and state levels, as well as those engaging in federal advocacy at the national level. You’ll read about organizers’ work to strengthen disaster recovery, promote rent stabilization, and address source-of-income discrimination, among other efforts.

We hope that as you engage with these articles, the history of tenant organizing comes alive in new and exciting ways that inspire future action and expand your understanding of the essential role played by tenant organizers in the fight for housing justice.



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The Resilient Work of Tenants:

Past



Reflections on a Tenant Organizing Journey



By Sid Betancourt, NLIHC

This article was adapted from an interview with John Atlas, a leader in the tenant organizing movement during the 1970s and '80s and the co-founder of Shelterforce, a publication that focuses on stories about affordable housing, including tenant organizing.

John Atlas grew up during tumultuous times – the era of the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, and the Vietnam War protests. Martin Luther King, Jr., had the most significant influence on him. But he was also inspired by the “radical pragmatism” of Saul Alinsky, Eugene Debs, and the leaders of the SNCC who coordinated the youth-led, nonviolent, direct-action campaigns against segregation and other forms of racism. They reaffirmed the traditional American values of liberty, equality, democratic elections, rights of minorities, multiple loyalties, volunteerism, and participatory citizenship.

John earned a law degree from Boston University Law School and a master of law degree from George Washington University Law School in the early 1970s. In D.C., he worked with a community group fighting displacement in the city’s low-income Shaw neighborhood, learning from black women leaders about the power of organizing against rising land costs and relocations. Despite challenges, he managed to secure housing funds for low-income residents from powerful figures in D.C.

John soon moved to New Jersey, where he was closer to his brother. While running a legal aid program that represented thousands of low-income clients a year, he

helped build what many believe was one of the most successful tenants’ rights groups: the New Jersey Tenant Organization (NJTO). The group won fights for rent stabilization

in over 100 municipalities and successfully pushed for a state just cause eviction law. To protect tenants’ rights, NJTO helped build a multi-issue group called New Jersey Citizen Action that coalesced with unions and helped lower utility rates, make mortgages more affordable, protect the public from toxic dumping, and increase taxes on the rich.

NJTO was composed mainly of middle-class people, which in John’s eyes made the group not as inclusive as it might have been. Energized by the group’s victories, John started *Shelterforce* in 1975 with some close friends, a decision which eventually led to the formation of the National Tenants Union (NTU) in 1980. NTU achieved some amazing triumphs, including successfully coordinating a national response against a congressional amendment to a funding bill that threatened state rent stabilization laws. (Read more about the history of the NTU [here](#).)

Tenant organizing, John emphasizes, isn’t easy; it requires strong relationships and excellent communication. You must be able to respect everybody involved and work together to advocate against harmful actors, whether governments, landlords, property managers, or others. John remarks that having fun is also part of the work – otherwise, it would be that much more difficult to do!

In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected president, making tenant organizing harder than it had been before. It seemed at the time that those in power believed racism was a tool to maintain their control, and they seemed more than willing to wield this tool, making it hard for many grassroots movements, including those of tenants, to stay alive. There were many attacks on affordable housing from the Reagan administration, and many



John Atlas



people who had the privilege to do so – mainly middle-class folks – moved on from tenant organizing and began other careers.

Such experiences resulted in setbacks but also led to important realizations that have shaped John’s approach to advocacy. For aspiring tenant organizers, John advises creating organizations that build collective power among people of different classes, races, genders, and other categories. He explains that “you can transcend issues of race and class when you bring people together around issues that impact everyone. Tenant rights have

always done that.” John also recommends that tenants play the “inside-outside game,” primarily focusing on building a membership base by winning issues through organizing and marching, but also getting involved in elections, such as by running for office or working to get out the vote.



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“A Marathon, Not a Sprint”:

LARRY GROSS REFLECTS ON FIVE DECADES OF TENANT ORGANIZING IN LOS ANGELES

By Courtney Cooperman, NLIHC

This article is adapted from an interview with Larry Gross, executive director of the Coalition for Economic Survival.

The Coalition for Economic Survival (CES) is a grassroots community-based organization that organizes tenants in the greater Los Angeles area and empowers them to impact the decision-making processes that affect their day-to-day lives. Since its establishment in 1973, CES has “had a hand in most of the laws that protect tenants in the city of Los Angeles,” as founder and executive director Larry Gross explains. CES has led the effort to bring rent stabilization to Los Angeles and West Hollywood, organized tenant associations, worked to preserve HUD-subsidized and government-assisted housing, and helped tenants purchase their buildings to keep them permanently affordable.

In the 1970s, Los Angeles faced exorbitant rent increases. CES started organizing tenants and successfully advocated for the City of Los Angeles and unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County to adopt rent stabilization laws. However, after a party change in the county’s Board of Supervisors in the early 1980s,

the county rolled back these laws. CES and its allies put forth a ballot initiative to permanently establish rent stabilization in Los Angeles County. The initiative did not pass but received an overwhelming majority of support in West Hollywood, an unincorporated area of Los Angeles County. CES’s organizing led to the incorporation of West Hollywood, with an elected City Council that immediately approved a rent stabilization ordinance. The incorporation of West Hollywood as the first-ever “city built on rent control” is one of the proudest moments of Gross’s career, but CES’s impressive track record makes it impossible to choose just one. “The most invigorating and joyous thing that I



CES marchers

CES activists gather for housing justice rally

see - because there's a lot of hills and valleys - is seeing a tenant recognize their power and realizing that they have the capabilities to make change," said Gross.

Throughout Gross's five decades of tenant organizing, the housing crisis has only intensified. "Back then, when people were being priced out of their homes or evicted, they [...] could find other housing. Today, it's impossible. If you're evicted [...] you're likely to be pushed out of your community [...] So that's particularly hard for disabled people, for seniors, for people with children [...] Your whole social network of friends and services, doctors, pharmacies [...] are totally lost because you're pushed out."

In the face of an accelerating crisis, Gross has seen the tenant movement expand significantly as more organizations step into tenants' rights issues. He highlighted the conversion of affordable homes into luxury units, the demolition of rent-controlled units, and the failure of government to address these problems as causes of housing unaffordability. Gross emphasized the need to "preserve and protect our existing affordable housing, as well as committing to build more affordable housing."

When asked what advice he would give to a tenant organizer new to the movement, Gross responded, "Recognize this as being a marathon, and not a sprint. It takes a lot of work to build a base, give tenants confidence, and win their trust. Solutions aren't going to happen overnight, and you have to be prepared for the lows to get to the highs. It takes a lot of work, a lot of determination and commitment, and you can't give up. You've just got to keep fighting and organizing and growing." He also emphasized the importance of trusting and empowering people with lived experience: "Your best advice and ability to understand situations and solutions come from the people who are directly impacted. Relying on and ensuring tenant leadership is key to success."



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Larry Gross joins with tenant leaders to advocate for tenants' rights



WANT TO BECOME PART OF TENANT ORGANIZING HISTORY? JOIN THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT!



NLIHC is currently seeking members for the 2024-2025 Collective. This group consists of tenant leaders who gather regularly to discuss shared concerns, plot advocacy strategies, and ensure that NLIHC effectively addresses the needs of low-income individuals and families across the nation. These advocates directly engage with staff, sharing their stories of lived experience and learning from each other about how to engage in federal policy advocacy.

Scan the QR code below before May 3, 2024, to complete the interest form, or contact sbetancourt@nlihc.org after that date for further details about how to apply to join the next Collective cohort.



*The Resilient
Work of Tenants:*

Present





The National Alliance of HUD Tenants

By Geraldine Collins



Geraldine Collins

As NLIHC celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2024, the National Alliance of HUD Tenants (NAHT) is celebrating the close partnership it has had with NLIHC since its inception.

It has been 33 years since NAHT was created. It is the only tenant-led national organization focused on the housing and habitability of HUD-subsidized tenants throughout the country. NAHT serves over 1.2 million tenants living in Project-Based Section 8 housing and now also serves tenants moving over from public housing to RAD as well.

Throughout its history, NAHT has successfully administered several VISTA Projects through AmeriCorps. These projects were instrumental in helping tenants organize and save their homes. In a one-year program, NAHT's VISTAS work diligently to preserve over 35,000 homes. NAHT works alongside HUD to make sure this is accomplished.

In 2019, NAHT worked to draft the language that would eventually become the "Tenant Empowerment Act." The bill will hopefully be reintroduced during this congressional session by Representatives Maxine Waters (D-CA) and Ayanna Pressley (D-MA). NAHT, in collaboration with NLIHC, also played a part in guiding the creation of the Biden-Harris administration's *Blueprint for a Renters Bill of Rights*. In addition, NAHT is collaborating with others to develop national tenant protections legislation.

NAHT looks forward to continuing to pursue its mission of helping preserve and improve affordable housing, protect tenants' rights, and promote resident control and ownership.



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Building Power through Resident Organizing Networks

By Lindsay Duvall, NLIHC

"When they see the blue shirts walking into the Capitol, they know we're there for business," reflects Maria Hernandez, a Residents United Network (RUN) steering committee member representing San Diego. "Ten years ago, there were just a few of us. Now, there's a lot more of us."

RUN was the first of four Resident Organizing Networks (RONs) developed by national organization Community Change in partnership with statewide advocacy groups. Maria joined RUN because she felt blessed to have an affordable home and wanted to ensure that others, especially single parents like herself, had similar

opportunities. Through RUN, Maria built rapport with state legislators and learned who to call for answers. She's been a part of numerous campaigns, from the 2017 enactment of California's largest investment in affordable housing, to efforts to ban source-of-income discrimination, to the current fight against the criminalization of homelessness. In addition to her leadership role with RUN, Maria now sits on several other organizations' boards and committees - a key leadership development strategy that can truly build shared power with impacted residents.

The RONS - located in California, Washington, Oregon, and Louisiana - aim to center the wisdom of people with lived experiences of housing insecurity and homelessness in statewide advocacy and legislative processes. While the theory of change for each RON is the same, the strategies differ from state to state, based on member priorities, allied partners, the state legislative process, and other factors. Flexibility has been key to the success of the RONS in both building resident power and achieving legislative wins.

"It's hard for [policy makers] to tell us what they need when they've never experienced it," explains Duaa-Rahemaah Hunter, statewide organizer for the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance and Resident Action Project (RAP). Duaa-Rahemmah joined RAP after being a housing case manager because she wanted to change the policies that were holding her clients back. She travels to every corner of the state to meet with

residents and support their advocacy. She is intentional in creating diversity within RAP and loves to find creative ways for residents to participate in RAP's legislative campaigns. Duaa-Rahemmah recalls one action where, after many tenants received "rent increase notices," RAP leaders handed these notices over to their state elected officials to drive home the urgency that too many Washingtonians were unable to pay rent.

"When we speak truth to power, and we do it all together, it gives me goosebumps," says Katy Heins, one of the organizers who helped set up the RONS. She loves hearing residents reflect on their power and on being part of a team that is building the kind of world they want to see.

Learn more about the inspiring work of the RAP and other Organizing Networks:

- Residents United Network (CA): <https://www.housingca.org/our-work/run/>
- Resident Action Project (WA): <https://www.wliha.org/advocacy/resident-action-project>
- Residents Organizing for Change (OR): <https://www.oregonhousingalliance.org/residents-organizing-for-change/>
- Residents Organized for Housing Louisiana: <https://housinglouisiana.org/post-400/>



Residents United Network's 2019 lobby day at the California State Capitol



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In the Wake of Disaster:

A TENANT ORGANIZER SHARES HER ADVOCACY STORY

By Sid Betancourt, NLIHC

This article was adapted from an interview conducted with Stephanie Winn, a tenant leader in Houston, Texas.



Stephanie Winn

It was disaster - not one but two catastrophic storms - that brought tenant leader Stephanie Winn to the world of housing advocacy. Driven by her personal and professional experiences, she became a tenant organizer committed to creating positive change. Her journey involves facing major obstacles, advocating for the rights of her community, and working towards achieving safe living conditions.

Stephanie's advocacy story began in 2017, after Hurricane Harvey wreaked havoc on her home, causing tremendous damage and even leaving her carpet infested with maggots. As mother to a young daughter, addressing the dire living conditions was especially urgent. Yet despite reporting the issues, no action was taken by those in charge. "[The building] was old, and they weren't even thinking about rehabilitating the apartments," Stephanie recalls. Fortunately, Ericka Bowman, a local community organizer with Texas Housers, stepped in, providing residents with stipends for groceries and rallying around a lawsuit against the owners of Stephanie's building for neglect. Stephanie notes that Erica was a huge mentor to her and inspired her as an organizer. The group won the lawsuit, but unfortunately the judge reversed the decision, which left much work still to do to improve living conditions. Ericka was able to organize residents and collaborated with Lone Star Legal Aid to initiate a \$40 million project to fix Stephanie's apartment complex.

Reflecting on the challenges brought about by Harvey, Stephanie emphasized the importance of resilience. It was this quality that enabled her to respond quickly and effectively a few years later, when a major ice storm hit Texas and left Stephanie's home in critical condition for the second time in fewer than five years. In response, Ericka, Stephanie, and the community came together

once again to aid those affected by the power outages caused by the storm, ensuring fairness in rebuilding while working to address the damage.

Motivated by Erica's encouragement, Stephanie has since begun expanding her work, taking on issues like inadequate compensation for displaced tenants and pushing for better living conditions. She now advocates for comprehensive renovation from the ground up. "I don't understand what these owners are holding on to; these subpar living conditions are unfair," Stephanie says, emphasizing the need for the right support to drive positive change. Growing frustrated by the lack of progress in her community, Stephanie has taken matters into her own hands. She began advocating at the federal level in 2023 and in 2024 joined the Housers Academy, a group facilitated by Texas Housers to grow a statewide network focused on expanding the rights of low-income households. She envisions greater community involvement and unity and dreams of empowering her community with housing vouchers, enabling residents to choose where they live.

Stephanie's journey is a testament to the power of resilience, advocacy, and community engagement. Through her efforts, she strives to create lasting change for her community, driven by the conviction that everyone deserves the right to affordable and accessible housing in a community of their choice.



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How the Louisville Tenants Union Won the First Anti-Displacement Policy in the South

By Gabby Ross, NLIHC, and Jessica Bellamy, Louisville Tenants Union

Three years ago, poor and working class Black tenants from across Louisville, Kentucky's historically Black neighborhoods started writing legislation. "We were tired of waiting for our politicians to write policy that would keep us in our homes and in our communities," explains Jessica Bellamy, the tenant organizer and co-founder of the Louisville Tenants Union who led the campaign to write and pass the first anti-displacement policy in the southern U.S.

As a child growing up at the intersection of Clay and Lampton streets in the city's historically Black neighborhood of Smoketown, Bellamy developed a strong sense of community. The intersection was a popular place for residents to convene, because Bellamy's grandmother had opened a soulfood restaurant on the corner named Shirley Mae's Cafe. Shirley Mae also later opened a juke joint across the street that served as a club house for many people in the community. Every member of Bellamy's family, including Jessica herself and her brother, have worked in the family businesses.

Catty-corner from the juke joint is Sheppard Square Apartments, formerly Sheppard Square housing projects, where Bellamy's father grew up. Sadly, at the age of eight, Bellamy and her family suffered his loss. His murder displaced Bellamy from the community, but that didn't stop her from growing up in Smoketown. Bellamy stayed connected to her community by attending schools in the neighborhood (or within walking distance), by working shifts in the family businesses from the age of 12 on, and later by organizing residents in the neighborhood to fight against the gentrification of Smoketown. By the time she had become an adult, Bellamy had been priced out of the community. Even though she had been given the

house she grew up in, she couldn't afford to renovate it to make it livable again. Contractors whom she hired to do the work gave her construction bids of as much as \$300,000 because houses in the area were being flipped for skyrocketing prices. Rents and real estate prices in Smoketown had begun to shoot upward with the renovation of the original Sheppard Square housing projects, which displaced hundreds of deeply rooted families from their community.

In 2020, Bellamy started organizing with tenants from across multiple historically Black neighborhoods, and together they discovered that all their communities suffered from similar problems. Bellamy was on fire to organize more tenants on the basis of their shared self-interest in protecting and restoring their communities. With support from the office of Councilman Jecorey Arthur, Black poor and working class tenants worked together for over two years to write the "Historically Black Neighborhood Ordinance." In year three, the Louisville Tenants Union launched its campaign to pass this crucial legislation, and along the way, the members realized that it was not just poor and working class Black neighborhoods that were vulnerable. As a result, they expanded their legislation to cover the whole city, started organizing more tenants, and invited them to take action with the campaign. This grew their base extraordinarily. As a result, they renamed their ordinance the "Anti-Displacement Ordinance." People from all over the city were joining the campaign by signing the petition, sending postcards and emails to their representatives, showing up at City Hall whenever the ordinance was being discussed,





participating in actions, giving addresses to the metro council, and taking on roles within the campaign to strengthen its efforts.

In June 2023, five months before the vote, only one council person was for the ordinance. But after months of organizing constituents in all 26 voting districts of Louisville, council members jumped on board with the ordinance one by one. Finally, on the day of the vote - November 9, 2023 - Louisville's mayor and every major developer in town spent the entire day calling representatives to kill the ordinance. That night, the Louisville Tenants Union packed City Hall, and together they unanimously passed their policy. Louisville's mayor, who was previously a luxury hotel developer, wouldn't sign the ordinance, and he allowed it to become law without his signature.

Now, at the start of year four, the Louisville Tenants Union is recruiting members of its base to step into their power and hold seats on the Anti-Displacement Ordinance commission. This commission will defend Louisville's communities that are vulnerable to displacement from housing discrimination and gentrification. This commission will have the power

to offer remedies to support individuals and their households to live in their communities for the long term, and they will be able to impose consequences on companies, organizations, and individuals with documented cases of discrimination in communities vulnerable to displacement.

Tenants living in areas that are vulnerable to displacement will be able to access the benefits of this crucial legislation in the fall of 2024. Outside of recruiting strong candidates for the community, the Louisville Tenants Union is also raising community awareness about this legislation. The group aims to prepare communities all over the city for the activation of the ordinance. Their success proves that effective organizing requires base-building, community relationships, and resilience.



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Tenants Organizing Against Hate

By Gabby Ross, NLIHC

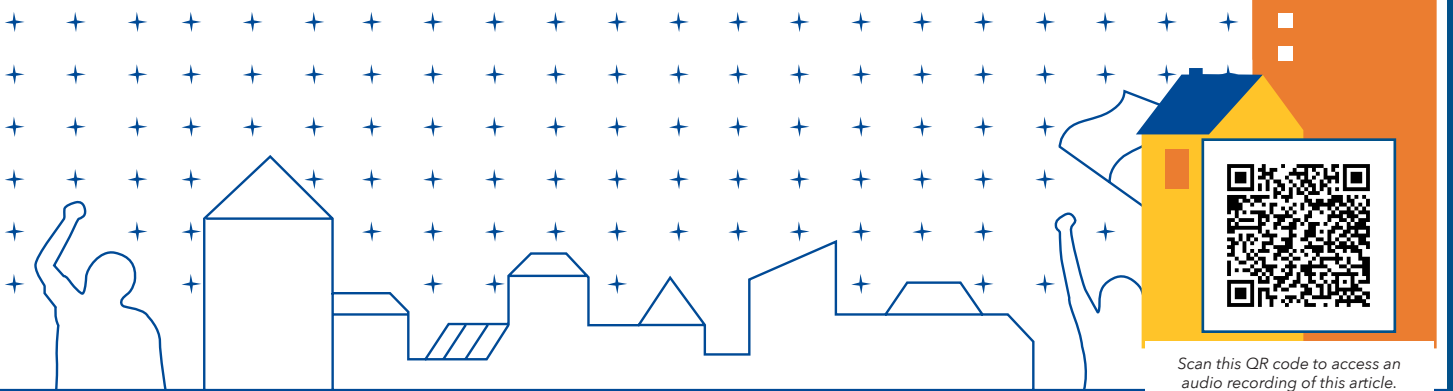
This article was adapted from an interview with Tristan Call of the Bedford County Listening Project.

Tristan Call is a community organizer for the Bedford County Listening Project, a group based in Shelbyville, Tennessee, that is dedicated to organizing renters in its community to advocate for better housing conditions and more affordable rents. Tristan, who is originally from Huntsville, Alabama, got involved in community organizing in Shelbyville a decade ago, initially focusing on labor organizing and immigrant rights advocacy. He describes the political landscape in Shelbyville as a “battleground” for civil rights in Tennessee. In that effort, he became part of an organizing team that helped create what is now known as the Bedford County Listening Project.

In 2017, Shelbyville residents stood against a demonstration of hatred that had come into their town. After the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that summer, white supremacist organizers had descended on Shelbyville, hoping to find more support for their movement in the rural community. Other organizers and residents formed a broad coalition across Shelbyville, including Black, Latino, and white residents, and greatly outnumbered the rally planned by the white supremacist group. This organizing success was a catalyst for the creation of the Bedford County

Listening Project. The group fostered an environment for organizers to reexamine together the world we live in, the struggles we share, and how to implement effective change. The Listening Project uses a model in which renters can make decisions for themselves about the direction of the local movement. The organization does not just advocate for renters; instead, the organization is made up of renters standing up for each other and stepping into their power.

“Everybody in town that’s poor has the same landlords. Everybody has the same bosses. Nobody can afford to live here. Everybody’s getting pushed out,” says Tristan. “The thing that has been very clear to me in my time organizing in Shelbyville is that renters want to organize because the conditions they’re up against are totally unsustainable, and people need solutions. The problem is that the power difference between renters and landlords is so steep that the costs of organizing are too high to bear for most people who want to. Now, as the situation gets worse, people will organize in larger numbers anyway, even against the risks that are out there. It will happen.”



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The Resilient Work of Tenants:

Future



Insights about the Future of Tenant Organizing from Members of NLIHC's Collective

By Sid Betancourt, NLIHC

The Collective is a cohort of tenant leaders from around the country who work closely with NLIHC and leverage their lived experience to elevate concerns, chart an advocacy path, and ensure that NLIHC effectively addresses the needs of low-income people and families. NLIHC staff recently spoke with members of NLIHC's Collective to learn more about their work and get insights into their ideas about the future of tenant organizing. Here's what two members of the Collective - Sharon Norwood and Dee Ross - had to say.

SHARON NORWOOD (CHICAGO)

Sharon is a childcare provider and advocate from Illinois. Her primary passion is advocating for source-of-income protections. As a former Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) participant, she was a reliable tenant who would consistently pay her rent on time - would sometimes even pay extra, in fact - and went above and beyond by covering repair costs that a landlord would typically cover. Even so, she found herself in Landlord Tenant Court, which led to her family's displacement. The experience fueled Sharon's transition to tenant organizing from childcare advocacy. She has since won many awards for her work, including NLIHC's Organizing Award in 2023. Looking ahead, Sharon envisions everyone having a safe place to live, especially children, and wants to break down the prevalent racism that exists in her area. In terms of advice for advocates, Sharon had this to share: "Each one, reach one, so we can teach one" - meaning that you should take the tools you have, use them, and share them with others. If readers want to contact Sharon, they can do so at snorwood@cafha.net.



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Members of the Collective have a wealth of insights to share, and we encourage readers to carry these perspectives into your tenant organizing. To stay up to date on the work of the Collective or explore opportunities for involvement in the coming years, reach out to Sid Betancourt at sbetancourt@nlihc.org.

DEE ROSS (INDIANA)

It was Dee's personal experience with unlawful eviction and homelessness at 19 - enabled by Indiana's lack of tenant protections and its status as one of the few states where tenants cannot withhold rent due to poor living conditions - that prompted him to establish his own non-profit organization, the Ross Foundation. At first, the Ross Foundation didn't focus on tenant organizing. However, he soon realized that housing was at the center of every issue. In response, Dee worked to set up the first tenants' union in his community in 2016 and the only statewide tenants union in Indiana in 2018. He used his skills to bring people from urban and rural areas together to advocate for housing justice and tenant protections. Dee looks forward to a future where a national landlord registry exists, and he is currently working to create a statewide registry. He also wants to expand his work outside of Indiana and begin to work in states that prohibit the withholding of rent.

Despite health challenges and other setbacks, Dee emphasizes the importance of finding victories in small wins. His message to organizers is that you have to persevere - success isn't defined by solving every problem. Dee, who has two invisible disabilities, acknowledges his privilege in still being able to be on the frontlines. More than anything, he wants readers to know that you are more than enough, you are valued, and you are needed in this fight. If readers want to learn more from Dee himself, you can contact him at dross@nlihc.org.



The Power of Youth Action Boards in Building the Future Housing Advocacy Movement

By Sid Betancourt, NLIHC

Youth Action Boards (YAB) are local groups dedicated to addressing youth homelessness in their respective communities. These boards typically consist of young adults who have personally experienced homelessness. While each YAB sets its own specific goals, their collective mission is to implement effective strategies tailored to their communities. Recently, NLIHC staff had the opportunity to meet two inspiring young advocates from Kansas, Kenadee Kessler and Adrianna Cogshell, who initially connected while at a shelter and later joined their YAB in Kansas together.

As a young tenant living in an uninhabitable apartment, Adrianna found herself without a home due to difficulties with her landlord. Resorting to couch surfing and paying occasionally for a room in a hotel, Adrianna eventually sought refuge in a Wichita shelter. It was there that she crossed paths with Kenadee.

Like Adrianna, Kenadee had experienced homelessness in Kansas as a young woman. As a result of her experience, she started to work with the Alliance of Overlooked Neighbors, a homeless advocacy group focused on reducing homelessness. She also joined a local Youth Action Board (YAB), advocating for at-risk youth in foster care. "I am super passionate about this line of work because I'm now the person I never realized I needed when I was in the foster care system and then experienced homelessness," says Kenadee.

At the shelter, Kenadee introduced Adrianna to a number of resources. She also recognized that Adrianna was a perfect candidate for the local YAB. As she learned more about the YAB, Adrianna became a

passionate supporter of the group, driven by her desire to see more young individuals actively participating in advocacy work.

Adrianna joined her local YAB because she doesn't want others to endure the hardships she faced while homeless. Her main motivation is her wish to encourage fellow youth to engage in advocacy. Looking ahead, Adrianna envisions remaining actively involved with the YAB, consistently working to increase youth participation in advocating for housing justice. Additionally, she aspires to see the extension of the youth shelter program beyond 30 days, which would ensure that individuals like her have sufficient time and resources to secure a home.

"People don't realize that having one person who believes in them can change their whole life and outlook," says Kenadee.

Adrianna couldn't agree more.



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Adrianna Cogshell

The Resilient

Work of Tenants:

**Updates: NLIHC Collective,
Policy,
and Research**



NLIHC's Collective 2023-2024 Update

By Sid Betancourt, NLIHC

Members of NLIHC's 2023-2024 Collective have been hard at work connecting with one another, engaging in advocacy, and helping plan NLIHC events. The group first met during the second annual Collective Retreat on October 6-9 in Albany, Georgia, returning to the sacred grounds of the Resora on Cypress Pond, a property of New Communities, which was founded by the late Reverend Charles Sherrod and his wife Shirley. The Sherrods were revered civil rights trailblazers, instrumental in creating the first community land trust (CLT) in the U.S. The Resora is now used for retreats devoted to promoting racial equity, learning, and community. Members of this year's Collective (previously known as the Tenant Leader Cohort) gathered to discuss their shared goals for achieving housing justice and to engage in community healing in preparation for their upcoming work.

This year's Collective includes 13 advocates:

- Ramona Ferreyra, Save Section 9
- Miracle Fletcher, housing commissioner with the City of Atlanta
- William E. Higgins Jr., executive director of Homeless Advocacy for All
- Tara Madison, National Alliance of HUD Tenants
- Sharon Norwood, housing justice organizer with Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance
- Tylar Nuevelle, executive director of Who Speaks for Me?
- Daniella Pierre, president of NAACP Miami-Dade Branch
- Robert Robinson, special advisor, Partners for Dignity and Rights, and adjunct professor of urbanism at New School University in New York City
- Dee (Derris) Ross, founder and CEO of The Ross Foundation
- Vee Sanchez, Empower Missouri
- Marsh Melody Santoro, tenant leader with Fairview Arms Apartments
- Albert Townsend, National Alliance to End Homelessness

- Shannon (Sunshine) Washington, Sunshine Charity Community Investment Coalition and Sunshine Tenant Authority Patrol and Support

Facilitators such as Rebecca Bennett of Emerging Wisdom LLC & InPower Institute and Dr. Jennifer Mullan of Decolonizing Therapy provided valuable insights, guiding the Collective in understanding the importance of community healing, trauma-informed care, and crisis intervention in their organizing work. During this time, members also had the chance to reflect on their visions for housing justice. Following these activities, the Collective gathered at Vicks Estate, owned by Albany local Clinton Vicks. Mr. Vicks prepared a delightful Southern barbecue meal that left everyone's stomachs satisfied.

The restorative weekend offered a space for reflection by Collective members, inspiring them for the work ahead. Over the next several months, the Collective will convene to discuss shared concerns, chart an advocacy path, and ensure that NLIHC addresses the needs of low-income individuals and families nationwide.

In the months following the retreat, members of the Collective actively formed Community Agreements to strengthen their organization. They also collaborated with NLIHC staff to plan the Tenant Session at NLIHC's Housing Policy Forum 2024, ensuring the event met the needs of low-income tenants across the country. Additionally, they remain actively involved in shaping NLIHC's policy priorities.

Stay tuned for more information on how to join the next cohort of the Collective this summer. If you have any questions about getting involved in NLIHC's tenant-led work, please email Sid Betancourt at sbetancourt@nlihc.org.



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Policy Updates

By Kim Johnson, NLIHC

Note: Given the fast-changing nature of the legislative process, some information in this article may be outdated by the time of publication.

HUD'S FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUDGET

The U.S. Congress passed and President Biden signed into law on March 8 a fiscal year (FY) 2024 spending bill for HUD's vital affordable housing, homelessness, and community development programs. Despite funding caps, the bill provides an \$8.3 billion boost to HUD's budget, bringing total funding for HUD in FY24 to \$70 billion.

In a major win for affordable housing advocates and homelessness advocates, the bill provides increased funding for HUD's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program to cover the full cost of all existing contracts, and to expand the program to an additional 3,000 new households. The bill also increases funding for Homeless Assistance Grants, public housing operations and capital needs, and the Native American Housing Block Grant to help build more affordable, accessible housing in Native communities, and maintains funding for HUD's Eviction Prevention Grant Program.

BACKGROUND: THE "FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY ACT" AND AN HISTORIC SPEAKER VOTE

While Congress is supposed to enact a new budget by October 1, the start of the new fiscal year, drama in the House of Representatives slowed the FY24 budget process to a crawl. In June 2023, Congress passed the "[Fiscal Responsibility Act \(FRA\)](#)," an agreement to raise the federal debt ceiling in exchange for capping spending in the FY24 and FY25 federal budgets. The debt ceiling, or the "debt limit," is the legal limit on how much the federal government can borrow to pay for already-approved spending. When the federal debt begins approaching the debt ceiling, it is necessary for Congress to vote to raise the debt ceiling to ensure the federal government can continue paying its bills.

While raising the debt ceiling is typically a routine procedure, former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) refused to agree to raise the ceiling without steep cuts to domestic spending programs, leading to the enactment of the FRA. The FRA lifted the debt ceiling until 2025, in exchange for capping FY24 spending at FY23 levels and limiting spending increases to just 1% in 2025, among other provisions.

Despite the budget caps, far-right members of the House Freedom Caucus initiated a vote to remove Rep. McCarthy from his role as House Speaker on October 3, 2023, citing his willingness to negotiate with Democrats

and to pass a continuing resolution (CR) to keep the federal government funded and avoid a government shutdown. In an [historic first](#), Freedom Caucus members joined House Democrats to remove McCarthy from his position. This move also brought legislative work in the House to a freeze for weeks, as the chamber could not advance legislation without a new House Speaker in place. Republicans voted in a new Speaker of the House - Representative Mike Johnson (R-LA) - on October 25, 2023.

LOOKING AHEAD: FUNDING FIGHTS IN FY25

The cap on FY25 spending put in place by the FRA means that advocates will once again have to mobilize to secure increased funding for HUD's affordable housing and homelessness programs in FY25. Because the cost of housing and homelessness assistance programs rise every year - and because the recent increase in the cost of housing far outpaces increases in wages - increased funding is needed every year to maintain the number of households served by HUD's programs. Congress will have until October 1 to finalize and enact a FY25 budget for HUD programs.

House Republicans released a budget resolution for FY25 on March 6 that, as in the previous year, proposes an up to 30% cut to domestic spending programs. A "budget resolution" is a nonbinding document that can act as a blueprint to help guide Congress as it makes

spending decisions. While Congress does not have to follow the resolution, it nevertheless signals potential priorities for House Republicans in FY25. NLIHC will continue to track the FY25 budget cycle, and work with our members, partners, and allies to ensure HUD's affordable housing and homelessness programs receive increased funding in the coming fiscal year.

TAX BILL PASSES HOUSE, STALLS IN SENATE

The U.S. House passed on January 31 a bipartisan tax deal, the "Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act of 2024," that expands the Child Tax Credit (CTC) in exchange for extending corporate tax breaks included in the "Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017." The CTC is a tax credit that provides low-income families with children additional money to help with the cost of raising a child. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates the CTC expansion will lift as many as 400,000 children out of poverty.

In addition, the bipartisan tax deal expands certain provisions of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) but fails to include key reforms that would better target the program to meet the housing needs of people with the lowest incomes and those experiencing homelessness. LIHTC is the nation's primary source of federal financing for the construction and preservation of affordable housing, but on its own, the tax credit is rarely used to build homes affordable to people with the greatest and clearest needs.

"By failing to include critically needed reforms to our nation's largest source of financing for affordable rental housing, Congress continues to neglect the housing needs of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness," said NLIHC President and CEO Diane Yentel in a statement. "Increased homelessness is the tragic, yet predictable, consequence of underinvesting in the resources and protections that help people find and maintain safe, affordable housing. Despite the clear and pressing need, this tax package's housing provisions will do little to help states and communities address America's growing homelessness crisis and will leave too many unhoused people without a safe, affordable place to call home."

Despite passing the House, the bill has stalled in the Senate as some Republicans, led by Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID), push for changes to the bill text that would limit which families can receive the credit and how much families would be able to receive.

SUPREME COURT HEARS MOST SIGNIFICANT CASE ABOUT HOMELESSNESS IN DECADES

The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) heard *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* on April 22, a case that will determine whether people experiencing homelessness have a constitutional right to camp on public property when they do not have an alternative place to sleep. SCOTUS will decide whether laws regulating camping on public property constitute "cruel and unusual punishment," which is prohibited by the Eighth Amendment. The court will likely issue a ruling by the end of June.

A 2018 ruling from the Ninth Circuit found that, under the Eighth Amendment, cities cannot punish people experiencing homelessness for breaking anti-camping laws if there are no available shelter beds. As a result of the ruling, communities in the nine states under the Ninth Circuit's jurisdiction face legal challenges and greater scrutiny when they clear encampments and are pressured, instead, to focus on long-term housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness.

If SCOTUS upholds the current decision, jurisdictions around the country will no longer be able to respond to homelessness with imprisonment or fines and will need instead to focus on ensuring the true solution to homelessness - housing. A ruling against the current decision would empower cities and states to pass laws that punish people who have no other option than to sleep outside.

NLIHC and our partners at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, National Coalition for the Homeless, and National Homelessness Law Center held a rally at the steps of the Supreme Court on April 22 to show support for people experiencing homelessness, and show SCOTUS, Congress, and the media that homelessness and poverty are not crimes. NLIHC and our partners published a toolkit for advocates around the country to take action the week of April 22.

Take action on NLIHC's policy priorities at: www.nlihc.org/take-action

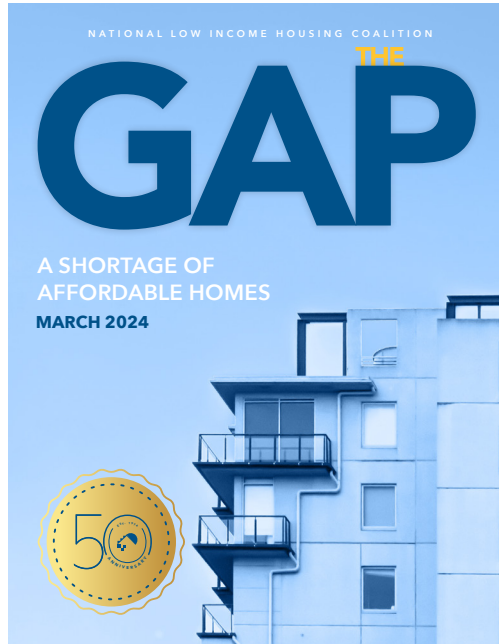
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Research Updates

By Dan Emmanuel, Mackenzie Pish, and Sarah Abdelhadi, NLIHC

THE GAP

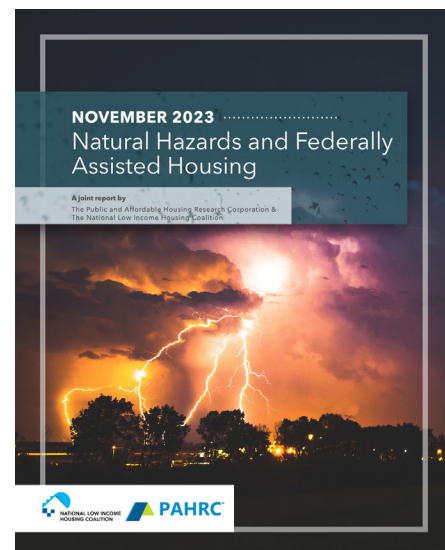


NLIHC published its annual report *The Gap* on March 14. The report finds that the lowest-income renters in the U.S. face a shortage of 7.3 million affordable and available rental homes. The shortage has increased by almost 500,000 rental homes since 2019, as the number of renters with extremely low incomes increased while the supply of housing affordable to them declined during the pandemic. Only 34 affordable and available homes exist for every 100 renter households with extremely low incomes. This shortage impacts every state and the District of Columbia, resulting in widespread housing cost burdens for renters with the lowest incomes. Seventy-four percent of extremely low-income renter households are severely housing cost-burdened, spending more than half their limited incomes on housing. These renters account for 69% of severely housing cost-burdened renters in the U.S. Extremely low-income renter householders are more likely than other renter householders to be seniors, have disabilities, be in school, or be single-adult caregivers.

The report emphasizes that significant federal investments are also needed to assist the lowest-income renters. Specifically, the report argues that Congress must make deeply targeted, sustained investments in affordable housing solutions, including a significant increase in resources for the National Housing Trust Fund, an expansion of rental assistance provided by the Housing Choice Voucher program, adequate federal funds to renew Project-Based Rental Assistance and to repair public housing, a national emergency rent stabilization fund, and strengthened renter protections. Visit www.nlihc.org/gap to learn more and to explore data on your community.

NATURAL HAZARDS AND FEDERALLY ASSISTED HOUSING

NLIHC and the Public and Affordable Housing Research Corporation (PAHRC) released a joint report on November 8, 2023, analyzing the risks that natural hazards pose to federally assisted housing and its residents. The report, *Natural Hazards and Federally Assisted Housing*, finds that nearly a quarter of





federally assisted homes are in neighborhoods with the greatest risk of negative impacts from natural hazards. In eight states, more than half of federally assisted homes are in neighborhoods with the greatest risk. The report also finds that 30% of federally assisted rental homes in rural areas are in neighborhoods with the greatest risk for negative impacts, compared to 23% of federally assisted rental homes in urban areas. Overall, in terms of specific hazards, heat waves appear to pose the greatest threat to federally assisted residents.

The report concludes that greater resources for mitigation and better recovery planning are needed at all levels of government to protect federally assisted housing and its residents from natural hazards. The “Reforming Disaster Recovery Act” would permanently authorize the Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program, helping to expedite the allocation of federal recovery funds and prioritize one-for-one repair or replacement of federally assisted housing impacted by disasters. Given the risks posed by heat waves, there is also a need to improve energy efficiency and air conditioning in older federally assisted homes, while expanding utility allowance policies in federal housing programs to cover air conditioning for all residents. You can read more about natural hazards and federally assisted housing at: <https://bit.ly/3QOqvsN>.

RENTAL HOUSING PROGRAMS DATABASE

In October 2023, NLIHC released an update to its Rental Housing Programs Database (RHPD) with support from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. First published in 2014, the RHPD is a publicly available collection of information on state and locally funded programs that create, preserve, or increase access to affordable rental housing. The database helps advocates, state and local agencies, policymakers, and other interested parties understand the ways in which state and local governments use their own financial resources to close the gap between available federal funding for rental housing and the unmet needs of renters in their communities. Users can explore detailed information on the scope, objectives, eligibility requirements, priority populations, and other characteristics of programs found in 48 states, the District of Columbia, and 70 large cities. The accompanying report, [*State and Local Investments in Rental Housing*](#), summarizes the characteristics of rental housing programs included in the 2023 RHPD. You can explore the updated database and read the report at: <https://nlihc.org/rental-programs>.



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