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Advocacy Works Wonders in Washington

by Michael Anderson // 2015, Summer



The evening of June 30th* when Washington State lawmakers approved significant new state dollars for affordable homes including bills that will create new funding sources for housing, services, and mental health facilities was a testimony that advocacy works. What started out as an iffy year for affordable housing in the Washington budget process, turned into a great year for housing and other programs.

Congratulations for these housing victories goes to the Washington Low-Income Housing Alliance and their allies. Since January, they have activated more than a thousand advocates to take action again and again.

Lawmakers passed a capital budget that provides \$75 million for affordable housing and \$15 million for weatherization of homes owned by low-income homeowners. The \$75 million for the Housing Trust Fund will create nearly 2,000 homes for seniors, homeless families, people with developmental disabilities and mental illness, veterans, homeless youth, and more. It will also create 500 new safe, healthy beds for farmworkers.

Furthermore, lawmakers passed **HB 2263** which will give local communities the option of asking their voters to support a new sales or property tax for affordable housing and mental health facilities. Those funds could also be used for operations and maintenance needs as well as homeless services. A similar

local taxing authority for mental health services brought in nearly \$100 million across the state in 2014 alone. ([For details on this instrument click here](#))

Also, there is more good news in that the final state operating budget includes full funding for Washington's Housing & Essential Needs and the Aged Blind & Disabled programs. And it funded many other important priorities, including a 9% increase in the TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) cash grant.

And that's not all, lawmakers also passed [SB 5987](#). This new law is a transportation package that includes significant new dollars for affordable housing and services in the Puget Sound region. The bill requires that at least \$20 million be provided for affordable housing near transit. It also establishes that 80% of the surplus properties in light rail stations must be made available for affordable housing. Additionally, an amendment by Representative Jessyn Farrell (46th LD) created a funding source for the Puget Sound region of up to \$518 million for services to improve educational outcomes in early learning, K-12, and higher education. This includes, but is not limited to low-income, homeless, or foster care youth.

These new dollars for the Puget Sound region are on top of the victory earlier in the session from Representative Larry Springer's (45th LD) [HB 1223](#). This bill secured at least \$45 million for new affordable housing in transit areas.

What did the Alliance do to make this year turn from grim to glowing? They put on a full court press of advocacy. Over the course of the 2015 state legislative session well over 1,323 people contacted their legislators, with many of these people contacting them more than once.

In February of this year, they held their annual Homeless Housing and Advocacy Day at the Washington State Capitol with 660 people in attendance including 114 board members and at least 135 people who had experienced homelessness or housing instability. During that day, there were 133 meetings with state lawmakers and 6 lawmakers spoke to advocates at the rally on the capitol steps. This extraordinary and diverse turn-out is in part due to the priority Housing Alliance puts on educating their members, especially through their [Board Advocacy Project](#) and the [Emerging Advocates program](#).

Keeping up the pressure, they held three press conferences throughout the legislative session and held an action where they rang a gong at the Capitol to acknowledge each person found unsheltered during the King County annual Point in Time homeless count, over 25 lawmakers participated along with advocates.

More than 84 advocates testified at hearings on Housing Alliance lead priorities. Hundreds of others signed in pro for the legislation and filled hearing rooms to support the Alliance's priorities. The Housing Alliance sponsored two sign on letters to lawmakers with 156 organizations across the state signing on. All of these activities garnered quite a bit of media coverage for the Alliance's priorities and on the need for affordable housing in general.

Additionally, many individuals sent letters to lawmakers to share their personal stories about homelessness or injustices faced by tenants and urged committee members to expand tenant protections and protect homelessness programs. Through their Board Advocacy Project, many nonprofit organizations held their board meeting in Olympia so that they could build advocacy into their Boards' work – they met with lawmakers and advocated on key Housing Alliance priorities.



On their victory, Michelle Thomas, Director of Policy and Advocacy at WLIHA said, *“The Housing Alliance is thrilled with the outcomes of this session. It took three extensions of the regular session to get here, but the politically divided legislature prioritized affordable housing and homelessness in the final state budgets. This was due to years of building lawmaker champions and because of the relentless and strategic advocacy we engaged stakeholders in throughout the long session. We never gave up and what was predicted to be a bleak session of cuts and set-backs, ended up yielding deep, tangible wins for affordable housing and homelessness. This proves that advocacy can move mountains.”*

Now that the legislative session is over, WLIHA is working with stakeholders to engage in interim advocacy activities targeting key lawmakers. The activities will include tours of affordable housing and homelessness programs, door knocking for elected officials, inviting lawmakers to board meetings, inviting lawmakers to engage in on sight resident activities and other strategic advocacy activities.

*Note: Washington State passed their budget at 11:30 pm June 30th to avoid a government shutdown July 1st.

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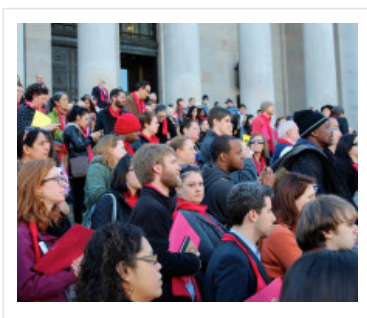
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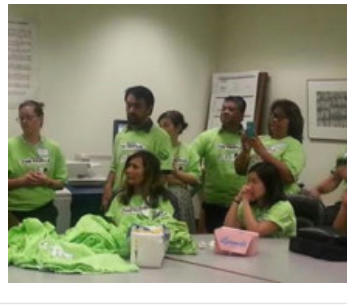
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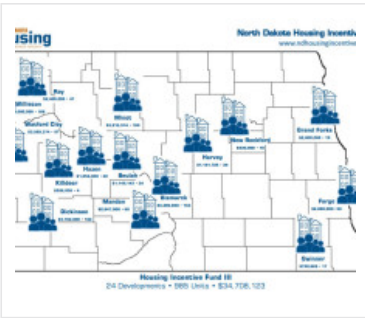
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