

Best Practices and Lessons Learned: Building Multi-Sector Coalitions to Influence Housing Policy

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Research clearly demonstrates that housing is inextricably linked to an array of outcomes in other sectors. The consequences of our current housing affordability crisis are spilling over into many other areas of life including education, health, civil rights, economic mobility, food security, criminal justice, and more. These sectors are increasingly recognizing that affordable homes are inextricably linked to their own priorities and concerns. It makes sense, then, that these sectors are growing more ready to join in on advocacy efforts to expand affordable housing for the most vulnerable people. The work to expand affordable housing solutions cannot be done by housing advocates alone. In the face of an unprecedented housing affordability crisis, along with the undeniable, cross-cutting realities of the research, powerful new constituencies are now possible in ways that they have not been before.

ABOUT THE OPPORTUNITY STARTS AT HOME CAMPAIGN

The *Opportunity Starts at Home* campaign launched in March 2018 with the goal of broadening the affordable housing movement into other sectors. The campaign's Steering Committee represents a wide range of leading national organizations that are working shoulder-to-shoulder to advance federal policies that expand affordable housing for the lowest-income renters: NLIHC, National Alliance to End Homelessness, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Children's HealthWatch, Catholic Charities USA, Children's Defense Fund, Community Catalyst, Food Research & Action Center, NAACP, JustLeadershipUSA, National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Association of Community Health Centers, National



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Association of Social Workers, National Education Association, National League of Cities, National LGBTQ Task Force, National Women's Law Center, and UnidosUS. Together, these multi-sector partners are working to advance federal housing policies that: 1) expand rental assistance; 2) expand the supply of deeply affordable housing; and 3) provide emergency assistance to people experiencing unforeseen economic shocks to avert housing instability and homelessness.

The campaign deploys policy analysis, communications, and advocacy to impact opinion leaders, policymakers, and the public. It has full-time dedicated staff at the national level and is leveraging the capacity of participating organizations. Moreover, the national campaign is providing technical assistance to ten state-based organizations to help the organizations build multi-sector coalitions and to support their advocacy efforts to impact federal policy. The ten state-based organizations are: Housing California, Idaho Asset Building Network, Maine Together, Oregon Housing Alliance, Utah Housing Coalition, Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio, Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey, Housing Network of Rhode Island, Prosperity Indiana, and Housing Action Illinois.

WHY BUILD MULTI-SECTOR COALITIONS TO ADVANCE HOUSING POLICY?

Enrich Your Content

Multi-sector partners enrich content by adding diversity in expertise. For example, when the campaign began creating a "Fact Sheet" that demonstrated how housing is

connected to health, it relied heavily on the knowledge of its health-sector partners to assist with framing, messaging, and research. The healthcare organizations were aware of powerful research unknown to campaign staff and helped incorporate language and messages that they knew would resonate with healthcare professionals. This type of collaboration is simply not possible if multi-sector voices are not at the table. The same process happened in the development of other fact sheets such as education/housing, civil rights/housing, food security/housing, and more. Having “unusual suspects” in a campaign will also help mainstream communications so that non-housing experts and novices can understand the message.

Pique the Interest of Policymakers

The use of non-housing voices advocating for housing policies will pique the interest of policymakers in ways that traditional housing groups cannot do alone. For example: the national campaign’s Steering Committee sent a letter to Congress advocating for \$50 million for a Housing Choice Voucher Mobility Demonstration, designed to help voucher households gain access to high-opportunity neighborhoods. Out of the 18 organizations on the Steering Committee, 16 are not primarily housing organizations. The endorsement of this policy by Children’s HealthWatch sends a clear signal to policymakers that it has implications for child health. Similarly, endorsement by the NAACP highlights implications for racial equity, endorsement by the National Education Association highlights implications for student achievement, and endorsement by the Food Research & Action Center highlights implications for food security. Not only does this grab the attention of policymakers, it also provides housers with new inroads to policymakers. Housing advocates often lament that certain elected officials “just don’t care about housing.” Chances are, though, that policymakers have prioritized an issue in their agenda to which housing is deeply connected. If a policymaker is, for example, primarily concerned with education, then housers can deploy their education partners to help make the case for why

better housing policies will improve educational outcomes. When housers are working alongside educators, doctors, anti-hunger advocates, civil rights attorneys, anti-poverty experts, and faith-based leaders, it enables housers to approach policymakers in new ways.

HOW TO BRING NON-HOUSING PARTNERS TO THE TABLE

Be Armed with Facts and Research

Mountains of research demonstrate how housing is connected to other sectors, but it is often surprising how little of that research is known to other sectors. For example, education professionals may not be aware of the research showing that low-income children in affordable housing score better on cognitive development tests than those in unaffordable housing, or the research showing that local inclusionary zoning policies have been proven to dramatically improve the performance of low-income students and narrow the achievement gap between them and their more affluent peers. Fact sheets will help make the case: provide the hard numbers, the infographics, and the landmark studies showing that success in their own field of work depends on whether people have access to safe, decent, affordable housing. The national campaign’s [Fact Sheets](#) are a great resource.

Stress Mutual Interdependencies

Once the facts are established, stress to prospective non-housing partners that you both need each other to be successful and that their goals are advanced with better housing policies. It is also important to emphasize that you are more likely to be successful if they add their sector’s voice to the mix. The goal is to convince prospective non-housing partners that affordable housing is not simply a “nice to have,” but rather a “need to have.”

Do Your Homework on Their Language

Before you even approach potential non-housing partners, study their work in advance, including their websites, goals, videos, reports, and published works. Learn the language with which they speak and then use their own language when

explaining the importance of housing. The reality is that each sector has its own unique language and chances are high that you will talk past each other if you use language comfortable among housers.

Be Patient and Have Flexible “Entry Points”

Multi-sector work is the long game. Most non-housing organizations are unlikely to pivot overnight to housing issues. It takes persistence. Some organizations have been thinking about the intersections of housing for a while and might be primed to align with housing advocacy efforts quickly, but many will be unsure exactly how they want to approach cross-sector work. Therefore, it is important to have flexible “entry points” through which organizations can participate in advocacy efforts. At the national level, we have created the Roundtable which is different from the Steering Committee. The Roundtable is a lighter time commitment, meeting just three times per year. Participating in the Roundtable does not indicate endorsement of the campaign’s policy goals, but rather a general commitment to ongoing dialogue and engagement. If the commitment you are asking for is too big and too fast, then you run the risk of potential multi-sector partners balking. Many want the space and freedom to learn about the campaign, stay updated on its progress, and occasionally engage in advocacy where it makes sense for them. Even though the Roundtable is a lighter commitment, these types of structures enable advocates to get their foot in the door. Subsequently you can start to build meaningful relationships and formalize regular communication channels, which eventually could blossom into something more robust. It is also important to regularly ask multi-sector partners for feedback about your work; after all, people are more likely to support what they help build.

THE CHALLENGES OF BUILDING MULTI-SECTOR COALITIONS

Building multi-sector coalitions is hard work and time consuming. There are certainly inherent challenges, but they can be navigated successfully.

Bandwidth of Multi-Sector Partners

Organizations that do not specialize in housing will have a myriad of other priority issues and limited bandwidth to expand their focus. They may want to participate and be supportive of your housing work but will have limited capacity to advance your priorities while focusing on their own issues. To overcome this, you must be prepared to shoulder the workload: provide them with the tools and resources in “bite size” pieces, write the first drafts of every call to action, sign-on letter, and fact sheet, and email simple instructions when the time is right to act.

Lack of a Common Language

As mentioned earlier, each sector has its own unique language. For example: housers tend to talk about AMI (Area Median Income), anti-hunger advocates tend to talk about the federal poverty level, and educators often talk about free/reduced priced lunch. Language barriers can be mitigated through consistent dialogue and by deeply researching other sectors to learn how they speak.

Sectors Are Not Monolithic

When building your multi-sector table, it is never as simple as having one seat for education, one seat for health, one seat for hunger, and so on. Just like there are different “camps” within the housing sector, there are also different “camps” in other sectors. For example, in the education sector, there are organizations that are pro-charter schools and anti-charter schools, and they each tap into different types of advocacy within their respective sector. Sectors are diverse within themselves, and these realities must be considered and discussed from the outset.

Lack of Relationships Across Siloes

The staff of housing organizations might not have deep relationships with staff in other sectors. Those in the same sector tend to flock together, which certainly poses a challenge when building cross-sector tables. You may be able to identify a specific organization from another sector that you would like to engage with, but there is often the practical reality of “who do you email first?” This can be time consuming and requires being intentional about building relationships across sectors.

Balancing the Weeds of Housing Policy

When building multi-sector coalitions, you will be bringing in organizations that do not have expertise in housing policy. Non-housing organizations will not know the nuances of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), or Housing Choice Vouchers (they might not even know the acronyms). Yet the whole point of bringing them to the table is to eventually advocate for specific types of housing policy. This poses an inherent challenge: on the one hand, you must make sure that you do not lose them by getting too in the weeds about specific housing

policies. Yet, as a houser, you know well that whether a particular housing policy is effective depends on the details. The devil is indeed in the details, but your partners from other sectors will not necessarily be equipped to discuss those details with you. You may have some multi-sector partners that are ready and willing to dive deep into the weeds of housing policy, but chances are that many will have neither the bandwidth nor interest in becoming housing policy wonks. An effective multi-sector coalition does not seek to make everyone an expert on housing policy, but rather seeks to leverage the respective expertise already in the room. Your multi-sector partners will eventually get to the point where they defer to you as the housing expert and trust your judgment on which housing policies will be most effective. Also, it can be helpful to identify a smaller working group that is reflective of your broader coalition but specializes in day-to-day policy advocacy work, such as identifying prospective legislative champions and coordinating meetings with policymakers.