

HUD Secretary Nominee Dr. Ben Carson's Responses to NLIHC's Top 10 Questions



President Trump has nominated Dr. Ben Carson to serve as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Given HUD's critical role as part of the federal safety net for some of America's most vulnerable households, NLIHC encouraged U.S. Senators to ask Dr. Carson during the confirmation process about his qualifications, knowledge of federal housing programs and their role in addressing the growing affordable housing crisis and alleviating poverty, and his priorities, if confirmed. Dr. Carson's answers came from his confirmation hearing and written responses to senator's questions.

HUD oversees federal rental assistance programs that serve over 5 million of the country's lowest income households, administers tens of billions of dollars in community development, disaster recovery, and homeless assistance funding, enforces fair housing laws, and acts as one of the largest mortgage insurers in the world. HUD plays a critical role in alleviating poverty, stabilizing and revitalizing communities, increasing the educational attainment and incomes of low income families, and providing safe, accessible and affordable homes to deeply poor families, seniors and people with disabilities.

BELOW ARE DR. CARSON'S RESPONSES TO NLIHC'S TOP 10 QUESTIONS:

1. What is the role of the federal government in ensuring that families with the lowest incomes have access to safe, decent, accessible and affordable housing?

It is often [impossible to build and preserve affordable rental housing](#) for the lowest income households without federal resources. This is because the rent the poorest households can afford to pay is often not enough to cover the cost of operating and maintaining the property, let alone any debt needed to build the property in the first place. It is simply not economical for private developers to build affordable rental housing for extremely low income families without federal assistance. The Trump administration should significantly expand resources to help families with the greatest needs access affordable homes.

ANSWER: *"This is about changing lives and providing opportunities to change the world. I believe that government can play an important role in this. Some have distorted what I've said about this. The government promotes life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When we talk about HUD traditionally, people talk about housing poor people, but it has the opportunity to do so much more than that. How do we develop as human beings?"*

"Housing as many families as possible in safe, affordable housing is a priority for me. If confirmed, I will look for ways to expand affordable housing options everywhere."

"We need to be cognizant of our fiscal responsibilities as well as our social responsibilities. Safety net programs are important. I would never abolish one without having an alternative."

"We have a history of compassion in America. I feel strongly that we should do everything that we can. If we are going to be successful as a nation, we need to develop everyone's talents."

2. What experience do you have that makes you qualified to oversee federal housing programs?

To our knowledge, Dr. Carson has little experience with or knowledge of the programs he would oversee. Dr. Carson has noted his personal experience of growing up in deep poverty and has alluded to the housing insecurity that his family experienced. How has this experience shaped his outlook on the need for federal housing assistance?

ANSWER: *"As a youngster I remember feeling that I was pretty lucky. We lived in a 700 sq. ft. home that had a lawn. And then my parents were divorced. My mother had no skills and we had no place to live. We moved in with relatives in Boston. I understand housing insecurity. My mother worked very hard as domestic help. Her desire was to be independent. I was a terrible student but my mom insisted that we read. As I did this I discovered a whole new world. This is one of the reasons that we started the Carson Scholar's Fund. We put in reading rooms, primarily in low-income schools... We in America, we are not each other's enemies. We need to combine our intellect. I've been very fortunate. I've moved from the bottom rung to the top rung. We are all in the same boat. We need to exercise true compassion."*

"One of the greatest lessons I've learned is to surround myself with great people. If confirmed, I will recruit a bipartisan list of strong housing practitioners to serve with me at HUD."

"I've interacted with a lot of people in Baltimore [when working at Johns Hopkins], and I understand their housing needs. I saw their medical needs that were affected by their environment. If we can give people hope they can move out of that situation. They need a safe and productive environment. I

have already looked at some places in Baltimore and DC. My goal is to get everyone into a decent position.”

3. What are your top priorities for HUD, if confirmed?

To date, President-elect Trump and nominee Dr. Carson have said very little on their vision for affordable housing. Given the many responsibilities and critical programs administered by HUD—in addition to the low spending caps required by the Budget Control Act—it is critical to know how Dr. Carson will prioritize funding decisions and what policy changes he plans to pursue.

ANSWER: Dr. Carson stated that he “will absolutely commit” to advocating for housing to be included in the President’s infrastructure package, agreed to consider hiring additional staff to enforce federal fair housing laws, and gave support to increasing efforts to help formerly incarcerated people reintegrate into their communities. Dr. Carson stated that he is “a fan of the Low Income Housing Tax Credit” and that healthy housing will be one of his priorities. He promised to “call for continued investment to end homelessness for veterans, the chronically homeless, and children and families.”

“If confirmed, one of my first briefings will be with the Office of Healthy Homes to better understand at an operational level how effective we have been and how we could be even more effective at carrying out the mission.”

“The reason that I concentrate on the holistic approach is because when I look at HUD historically I see a lot of good programs but the progress has not been as good. Whether in medicine or housing, a holistic approach, looking at the big picture, is always better.”

4. Will you commit to expanding resources for affordable housing in order to end homelessness and housing poverty?

There is an urgent need for a national investment in more homes affordable to the lowest income households. [NLIHC research](#) shows that for every 100 extremely low income families, there are just 31 homes that are affordable and available to them. As a result, 75% pay more than half their limited income on rent and utilities. [Every state and congressional district is impacted](#). Despite the proven track record of federal housing programs, only one out of every four eligible families receive the help they need. Helping more extremely low income households afford their homes should be a major goal of the incoming administration. NLIHC encourages President-elect Trump, Dr. Carson, and the entire incoming administration to protect and expand federal investments in affordable housing, as outlined

in [NLIHC’s memo to the Trump transition team](#).

ANSWER: “When it comes to deep affordability, though, removing all regulatory barriers won’t get you there. It comes down to subsidy. Subsidy levels haven’t changed appreciably under Democratic or Republican administrations.”

“I think we can all agree that we will all make sure housing is a key consideration in every appropriations bill. I saw years of statements from Chairs and Ranking Members of our Appropriations Committees, however, highlighting bright spots in their budgets, but both equally lamenting the fact that they could not do more. If confirmed I will be a vocal advocate internally for funding, but prioritization will continue to occur in this Administration as it did in the last.”

“Not only will I advocate for the HUD budget, but I want to put together a world-class plan on housing, and then I’m going to come to [Congress] with this plan.

“Housing as many families as possible in safe, affordable housing is a priority for me. If confirmed, I will look for ways to expand affordable housing options everywhere.”

“I agree with the goals President Bush established when he reconstituted the Interagency Council on Homelessness. I am also in favor of the goals of ending chronic, veteran and family homelessness...I will work with experts on ending homelessness to determine what future policy changes HUD should pursue to accomplish this worthy goal.”

“You have to attack the problem from both ends. There are a large number of people spending too much of their income on housing. We need to both raise their income and lower the cost of housing.”

5. Will you advocate for lifting the spending caps on non-defense discretionary programs?

The *Budget Control Act of 2011* set into motion low spending caps. Since that time, Congress has reached short-term agreements to provide relief with parity for defense and non-defense programs. However, the low spending caps will return for the FY 2018 budget. Moreover, President-elect Trump’s proposed Penny Plan would cut non-defense spending by 1% each year for 10 years. This would [devastate federal housing programs](#). For example, if Congress enacts final FY17 spending bills at the FY16 rate, HUD would see deep cuts to critical housing programs that could cause thousands of families to lose access to stable housing, putting them at increased risk of homelessness. This is because HUD needs approximately \$1.5 billion more than last year’s levels in order to maintain existing rental assistance contracts and current program levels. An estimated

100,000 vouchers could be lost in FY17 if Congress passes final spending bills at FY16 levels. During the campaign, Dr. Carson recommended a 10 percent cut across-the-board to all federal programs.

ANSWER: *"The concept of cutting across all budgets was just a concept. I've modified that to 1 percent, not 10 percent. We can never seem to cut because people have all of these "sacred" programs."*

6. Do you believe Congress and the administration should reprioritize federal housing spending to focus on those with the greatest needs?

Each year, the federal government spends \$70 billion to help subsidize the homes of higher-income households through the mortgage interest deduction (MID). Yet, half of all homeowners receive no tax benefit from the MID, and almost all of those who do benefit from the MID have incomes over \$100,000. Meanwhile, just one in four eligible households receive the rental assistance that they need. The [United for Homes](#) campaign seeks modest reforms to the MID to increase its availability to 15 million more low and moderate income homeowners and to reinvest the significant savings—\$241 billion over ten years—into affordable rental housing programs for families with the greatest needs, like the national Housing Trust Fund and other rental assistance programs. More than [2,300 national, state, and local organizations and government officials](#) have endorsed the campaign.

No answer was provided.

7. Will you work to protect and expand the national Housing Trust Fund (HTF)?

The HTF is the first new federal housing resource in a generation. It is highly targeted and exclusively focused on developing, rehabilitating, and preserving affordable housing for families with extremely low incomes. And, because it is administered as a block grant, each state has the flexibility to decide for itself how to use these resources to address its most pressing housing needs. Currently, the HTF is funded with dedicated sources of revenue outside of the appropriations process. In 2016, the first \$174 million in HTF dollars were allocated to states. This is an important step, but far more resources are necessary to meet the need. NLIHC is committed to working with Dr. Carson and the entire Trump administration to expand the HTF through infrastructure spending, tax reform, housing finance reform, and other legislative avenues.

ANSWER: *"As I said in committee, I believe in the goal of expanding affordable housing. I am not tied to any one mechanism. The HTF is new and I look forward to seeing some early results. I like what I see so far."*

8. What is your commitment to enforcing federal fair housing laws?

Since 1968, federal law has required that states and communities take active steps to affirmatively further fair housing (AFFH). Under the Obama administration, HUD issued a new AFFH rule, guidance, and tools to help states and communities better decide where to focus affordable housing resources in order to promote fair housing for all residents. In a [2015 article](#), Dr. Carson compared these efforts to a "[mandated social-engineering scheme](#)." NLIHC believes that Dr. Carson's interpretation of the rule [reveals a fundamental misunderstanding](#) of the Fair Housing Act, which was enacted to ban discrimination in the housing market and require local communities to affirmatively further the fair housing goal of integration. A community's obligation to affirmatively further fair housing is not new—what is new is the data, tools, and guidance that the Obama administration provided to enable communities to better meet their fair housing obligations.

ANSWER: *"I think the Fair Housing Act was one of the best pieces of legislation ever passed."*

"The Fair Housing Act is the law of the land so of course I will enforce it."

"I was surprised to hear that staffing [for fair housing enforcement] in the last 8 years was lower than when President Bush was in office. I will look at this and see what improvements we can make to get people hired."

"I recently met with and received a briefing from one of the authors of the AFFH rule. I am committed to enforcing the Fair Housing laws of our nation. The AFFH rule I have learned had as many internal detractors as proponents. Consequently, what was issued is at best a committee compromise filled with a lot of less than clear language. I believe it is important to give communities clarity. I will work to preserve the ideals of this rule while providing more clarity and will aggressively protect the fair housing rights of our citizens."

"That Act says that people we are receiving HUD grants should look around to find discrimination and then propose a solution. My problem is with people in DC telling mayors what to do. My objection is the central direction of people's lives."

"HUD has both a production/rental subsidy role and an enforcement role [to meet the housing needs of people with disabilities]. Beyond paying the rent for persons with disabilities, HUD has a responsibility to ensure accessible units are available under the law."

"As I stated in committee, I will aggressively defend the fair housing rights of all Americans. While I do not agree with creating federal mandates which dictate choice, I would certainly work to

create program improvements which lead to an environment where landlords actively pursue Section 8 participants (in response to a question about source of income discrimination).

"I will, without hesitation [continue HUD's support and enforcement of Equal Access Rules that ensure all individuals have equal access to the Department's programs "without regard to actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or marital status" and in accordance with their gender identity]."

9. Will you oppose legislation to add time limits and work requirements on households with federal housing assistance?

Speaker Paul Ryan's [A Better Way anti-poverty agenda](#) recommends imposing time limits and work requirements on "work-capable" people receiving federal housing assistance. The average stay of a family with housing assistance is approximately eight years, not significantly longer than the five-year limit proposed in *A Better Way*; those who stay longer tend to households with seniors and/or people with disabilities. In fact, the majority of voucher and public housing households are either elderly, have a disability, or include someone who works. Of the remaining households, almost half include a preschool child or a family member with a disability who needs the supervision of a caregiver. [NLIHC believes](#) that establishing burdensome and costly monitoring and enforcement systems in order to apply work requirements for the remaining 6% of households is neither cost effective nor a solution to the very real issue of poverty impacting millions of families living in subsidized housing or in need.

ANSWER: *"We have got to give people a springboard to get out of a situation of stagnation. For those people who are stuck in that situation, maybe we need to require some job training."*

"I believe the programs of HUD serve as a critical safety for many Americans. I further believe we should encourage programs which help families develop skills which lead to self-sufficiency. I worked hard as a child with an incredibly supportive mother to climb out of poverty and become a medical physician. This is a hard climb. As HUD Secretary, if confirmed, I want to help families leave public housing because they are able to, not because I want to force them out. I believe in the human spirit and we need to help our fellow citizens achieve their potential."

"We need to be cognizant of our fiscal responsibilities as well as our social responsibilities. Safety net programs are important. I would never abolish one without having an alternative."

10. How will you advocate for federal housing programs within the administration?

HUD Secretaries not only oversee the operation of critical federal housing programs, but also advocate for these programs within the rest of the administration, including the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the White House.

ANSWER: *"I will absolutely commit to advocating for the inclusion of housing in the President-Elect's infrastructure package."*

"If confirmed I will be a vocal advocate internally for funding, but prioritization will continue to occur in this Administration as it did in the last."