

ABOUT OUT OF REACH

By Sheila Crowley, President and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the National Low Income Housing Coalition and the 25th anniversary of *Out of Reach*. In 1974, Cushing Dolbeare convened the “Ad Hoc Low Income Housing Coalition” in response to major changes in federal housing policy. Eventually the ad hoc coalition was organized and incorporated into two partner organizations: the Low Income Housing Information Service (LIHIS) and the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC). Barry Zigas was hired as the new President of NLIHC and Executive Secretary of LIHIS in 1984 and Cushing stayed on to chair the NLIHC board and serve as a consultant to LIHIS. The two organizations merged in 1996.

Cushing believed strongly in the importance and influence of good data. She was also adept at managing and analyzing data electronically and was one of the first advocates to get a personal computer. *Out of Reach* reflected this passion and commitment. Cushing did the analysis and authored the first *Out of Reach*, with the subtitle *Why Everyday People Can't Find Affordable Housing*, which was published by LIHIS in August 1989. Seven hundred copies were printed and there was a second printing in December. The Ford Foundation and Edna McConnell Clark Foundation provided financial support. Cushing was the primary author or consulted on every issue of *Out of Reach* until her death in 2005. The 2005 issue is dedicated to her.

Why Everyday People Can't Find Affordable Housing was used as the subtitle until 1996, when it was changed to *Out of Reach: Can America Pay the Cost?* The 1997 and 1998 issues were called *Out of Reach: Rental Housing at What Cost?* Starting in 1999, *Out of Reach* was given a different subtitle each year along with graphics or illustrations for the front cover.

Another change in 1999 was the invitation to a housing notable to author a preface. Preface authors have been Senators Edward Kennedy (D-MA), Chris Dodd (D-CT), Paul Sarbanes (D-MD), Jack Reed (D-RI), and Tim Johnson (D-SD); Representatives Barney Frank (D-MA), Maxine Waters (D-CA), and Robert Ney (R-OH); HUD Secretaries Andrew Cuomo and Shaun Donovan; Boston Mayor Thomas Menino; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Executive Director Barbara Poppe; and AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust CEO Steve Coyle. NLIHC is honored that Barry Zigas has written the preface to the 25th anniversary issue.

A hallmark of *Out of Reach*, and indeed all NLIHC research, is its usefulness and accessibility to advocates at the state and local level. It was always intended to put sound data into the hands of people who wanted to demonstrate the need for affordable housing in their communities and to make the case to state and local policy makers and local media.

The early issues of *Out of Reach* included state and metro area level data. In 1999, with the support of the Housing Assistance Council, nonmetropolitan data were added. This expansion meant that for the first time *Out of Reach* covered every jurisdiction in the United States. The major message that year was “nowhere in the United States - in no state, metropolitan area, county, or New England town – is the minimum wage adequate to afford the two-bedroom Fair Market Rent.”

The 1999 issue was also the first year that the term “Housing Wage” was used in *Out of Reach*. From the beginning, one of the metrics reported in *Out of Reach* was the hourly wage one must earn to afford Fair Market Rent (FMR) at 30% of the household income. This has become the signature statistic from *Out of Reach*, quoted far and wide. It even showed up in a political cartoon in 2003,¹ for which NLIHC got permission to use on the cover of *Out of Reach* the following year.



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The Housing Wage has become a standard indicator of housing affordability. It is referenced in the 1998 *Encyclopedia of Housing* as the “Rental Housing Index (RHI).”² The 2012 edition called it the “Housing Wage,”³ as did the *Encyclopedia of Homelessness* published in 2004.⁴

One of the reasons for *Out of Reach*'s immense popularity is that until recently it was the only study of affordable housing need that was done annually and provided data for every jurisdiction in the country. For many years, NLIHC has coordinated its annual release with its partner state housing and homeless coalitions. Local press look forward to the stories they can generate with the data.

A lot has changed about advocacy and data in the last 25 years, but no change has been more monumental than the advent of the internet. In the early days, *Out of Reach* was published in booklet form and NLIHC continues to produce print copies each year. But its availability online starting in 1998 accelerated its use significantly. Much more data could be posted online than could be printed. The 1998 and 1999 data were posted on the NLIHC website in spreadsheet form. In 2000, *Out of Reach* became searchable on line. Today, *Out of Reach* has a ubiquitous digital presence. *Out of Reach* has had 23,740 unique pageviews in the last year. Its maps and other visuals circulate rapidly through social media.

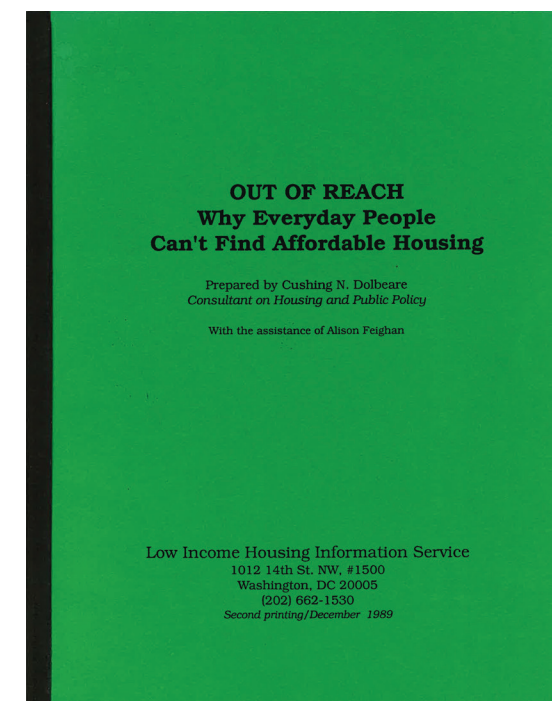
Despite its success as an affordable housing indicator and an advocacy tool, the tragedy of *Out of Reach* is that each year the housing affordability problems of the lowest income people in America grow worse. Documenting and publicizing a problem is necessary, but insufficient to solving it. At NLIHC, we look forward to the day when *Out of Reach* can be retired and everyone in our country has an affordable and decent home.



²Van Vliet, W. (Ed). (1998). *The encyclopedia of housing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, p. 12.

³Carswell, A.T. (Ed). (2012). *The encyclopedia of housing*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, p. 15.

⁴Levinson, D. (Ed). (2004). *The encyclopedia of homelessness*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, p. 266.



“The root cause of the housing problem in this country is the large and growing gap between the cost of decent housing and household income, particularly renter household income... The housing crisis among America’s poor is real. For most of these households, housing costs are increasingly out of reach.”

EXCERPT FROM THE 1989 ISSUE,
PREPARED BY CUSHING DOLBEARE