

America Must Act Boldly on Affordable Housing

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During this pivotal election year, Republicans and Democrats have elevated the discussion of affordable housing more than in any presidential election in recent memory. Both party platforms include housing plans to address America's housing affordability crisis, which continues to reach new heights.

Regardless of who wins in November, Congress and the next administration must act boldly to help the 11 million housing insecure households who pay more than half of their incomes on rent. They often face difficult choices between paying rent and buying groceries or seeing a doctor. In the worst cases, they become homeless.

America faces a shortage of 7.2 million rental homes that are affordable and available to 10.4 million extremely low-income households. Housing that would otherwise be affordable to the lowest income people is often being rented by higher-income households. Because of this shortage, just 3 in 10 extremely low-income renters have access to affordable housing.

Housing challenges differ from community to community; there is no silver bullet solution. Congress and the next administration must use every tool available to solve the problem. A comprehensive set of solutions to end housing insecurity in America should include expanding the federal housing choice voucher program to every household that needs it, along with a significant investment in production programs to increase the supply of affordable housing.

Housing vouchers help more than 2.2 million families live in stable, affordable homes by covering the difference between the cost of rent and what they can afford to pay. Despite the program's proven success in ending homelessness and reducing housing insecurity, limited funding means that a very low share of eligible families receives this needed assistance.

While expanding housing voucher assistance to many more families is an important part of the solution, it alone cannot fully address the scope of the housing crisis. Additional tools are necessary to address other challenges, including the need to recapitalize and preserve aging properties, revitalize distressed communities, provide housing options for low-income families in tight or gentrifying markets and produce accessible housing for families with disabilities and special needs. Addressing these gaps in the rental housing market requires investment in bricks and mortar through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (Housing Credit), national Housing Trust Fund (HTF), and HOME Investment Partnerships (HOME) program.

The primary source of financing for new affordable housing, the Housing Credit, has developed or preserved nearly 3 million affordable apartments, providing homes to roughly 6.5 million low-income families over the past three decades.

The national HTF—the first new production tool in over 25 years—is deeply targeted to develop and preserve housing for people with the greatest needs. Its first allocation to states is slated for this later this summer.

HOME provides states and local communities with a flexible source of gap financing to address a wide range of pressing housing needs. It is an important resource to help develop and preserve affordable housing in rural and high-cost communities alike.

Recently, Sens. Maria Cantwell (D-WA) and Orrin Hatch (R-UT) introduced The Affordable Housing Credit Improvement Act (S. 3237) to expand the Housing Credit by 50 percent over 5 years to finance an additional 400,000 affordable apartments over the next decade and make important improvements to enable deeper income targeting. Congress should enact this legislation, while also increasing resources for the national HTF, HOME and housing choice voucher programs.

These investments do not have to add costs to taxpayers. If we recalibrate current federal housing priorities to target resources to where they are needed most, Congress can serve the full continuum of housing needs among low-income people and make good on its nearly 70-year promise to ensure “a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family.”