



HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL

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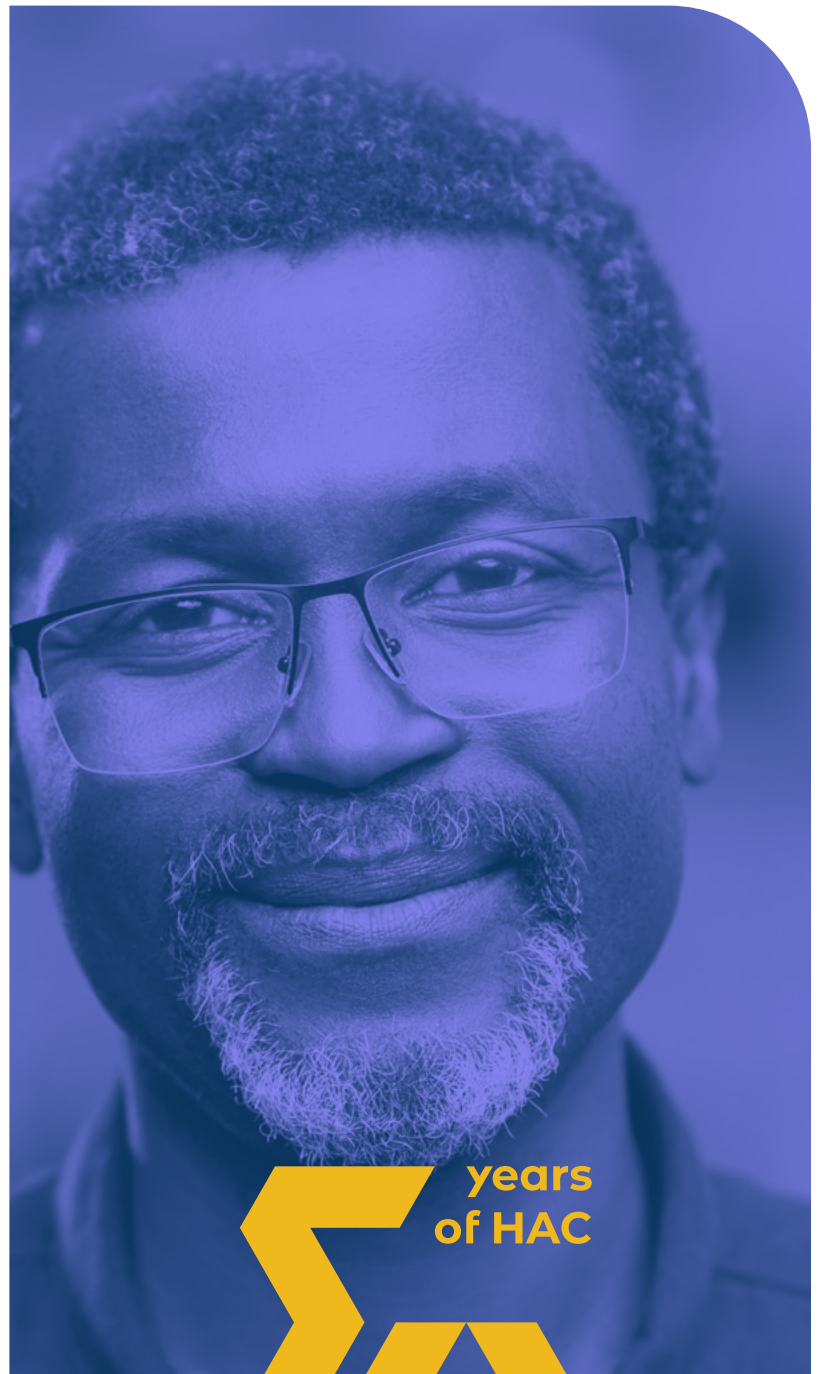
Dear Friends,

HAC is celebrating its 50th anniversary! That does not mean we are simply congratulating ourselves for our good work and good fortune. We are glancing fondly backward, to be sure, but mostly we are looking forward. In May 2021 we launched a three-year capital campaign with an ambitious but achievable goal: “All families in rural America have a safe, decent, affordable place to live by 2071.”

This issue of *Rural Voices* considers the past 50 years while focusing on the next 50. It revisits some of the many rural communities in which HAC has worked, and it features visions of the future from rural places and rural housing leaders around the country. Practical routes to reach these visions are available, though some are difficult and all—particularly society-wide crises like climate change and racial inequity—require attention far beyond the realm of housing.

Rural housers’ job is to take a positive vision for our communities and literally build it brick by brick, shingle by shingle. A great deal of work remains to make safe, decent, affordable homes possible for all by 2071. HAC looks forward to working with you to achieve this vision.

Sincerely,



Maria Luisa Mercado

Maria Luisa Mercado
Chair

Laura Buxbaum

Laura Buxbaum
Vice Chair

David Lipsetz

David Lipsetz
President & CEO

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A Half Century Legislating for a Thriving Rural America

The Senate President Pro Tempore reflects on his time leading the Senate Appropriations Committee, making a priority of investments in housing programs, and the challenges that remain.

By Senator Patrick Leahy

In Vermont, the majority of our people live in rural places, and that includes me and my wife, Marcelle. We live in a farmhouse on a dirt road in Middlesex, Vermont, population 1,779. I am looking forward to spending more time there when I leave the Senate at the end of this year.

I am proud to have been a continuous champion for rural housing needs during my 48 years in the Senate, including during my time as the leading Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee. I have supported housing programs that benefit the whole country, making that an ongoing priority as Congress makes annual decisions on our budget priorities. And I have always had a view toward making sure those programs work for rural places like Vermont.

There has been a housing crisis across America for decades, and rural places are no different. Federal investment is critical to building new housing, especially in rural areas where access to traditional capital is limited. But it has not always been easy to convince presidential administrations or others in Congress of the importance of these investments. During the most recent prior administration, particularly, the Appropriations Committee had to concentrate a great deal of effort on making sure that vital programs like the Community Development Block Grant program, the HOME Investment Partnerships program and almost all of the USDA's housing construction programs were not completely eliminated. And not only did we ensure that HOME, CDBG and USDA housing construction programs continued to serve the nation, we were able to secure year-over-year funding increases that allowed these programs to grow and reach more communities.

Rural communities can only truly thrive when everyone, including their most vulnerable members, has access to housing. Believing this, I have worked to ensure that housing programs serve the most vulnerable. Following the passage of the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act, the Appropriations Committee has provided millions of dollars every year through HUD's Community Development Fund to the states hardest hit by the opioid crisis, so they can develop recovery housing. I am an original cosponsor of this year's reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, and I have ensured steady funding to HUD's Rapid Rehousing for Victims of Domestic Violence program, so that those fleeing domestic violence, most often women and children, have safe homes in which they can rebuild their lives.

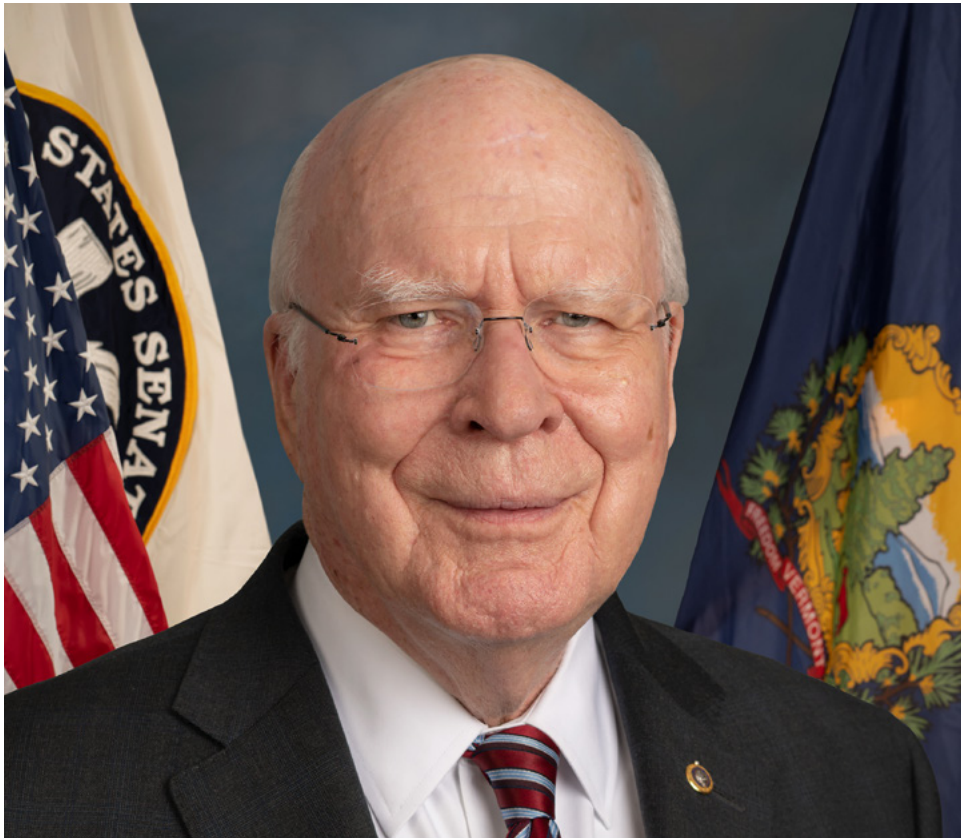
Rural development practitioners know that community investments in infrastructure result in a tangible benefit for housing access. I have also worked hard to ensure that funding programs that are not necessarily explicitly for housing construction are used to keep Vermonters, and other Americans, safely housed in vibrant communities. I worked to create the Northern Border Regional Commission in the 2008 Farm Bill, with the purpose of advancing rural economic development. This includes water and wastewater systems, transportation, clean energy, and other underlying



infrastructure that provide the foundation for affordable and livable communities. And now I am proud to be an original cosponsor of the Northern Border Regional Commission Reauthorization Act of 2022, which not only reauthorizes the commission for another decade, but also will expand eligible uses of funding to include housing projects in rural areas along New England's Canadian border.

One of the things that makes Vermont's small towns and villages so vibrant is the close-knit community life that comes from having housing, small businesses, and community centers in the same buildings in downtowns. This is a traditional way of life in small towns and rural places across America, and it has substantial benefits for both community development and housing affordability. I have had a career-long focus on preserving historic buildings in small town downtowns and village centers. Across Vermont, dozens of historic preservation projects have been funded by programs that I have created and championed, like the Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Grant Program, which focuses millions of dollars every year on projects in our country's smallest towns and cities.

Historic preservation projects funded by this grant program have created hundreds of affordable housing units, pairing Bruhn Grant funding or federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits with housing tax credits, rental



assistance and grant funding. I believe that these projects, like the French Block in Montpelier or New Avenue in St. Johnsbury, are a model for the country. In bringing back Congressionally Directed Spending (commonly known as earmarks), I have also allowed for direct government investment in the projects that communities need the most. In Vermont, this means new resources to invest in building, weatherizing, and upgrading affordable rural housing across the state, and each state has similar success stories.

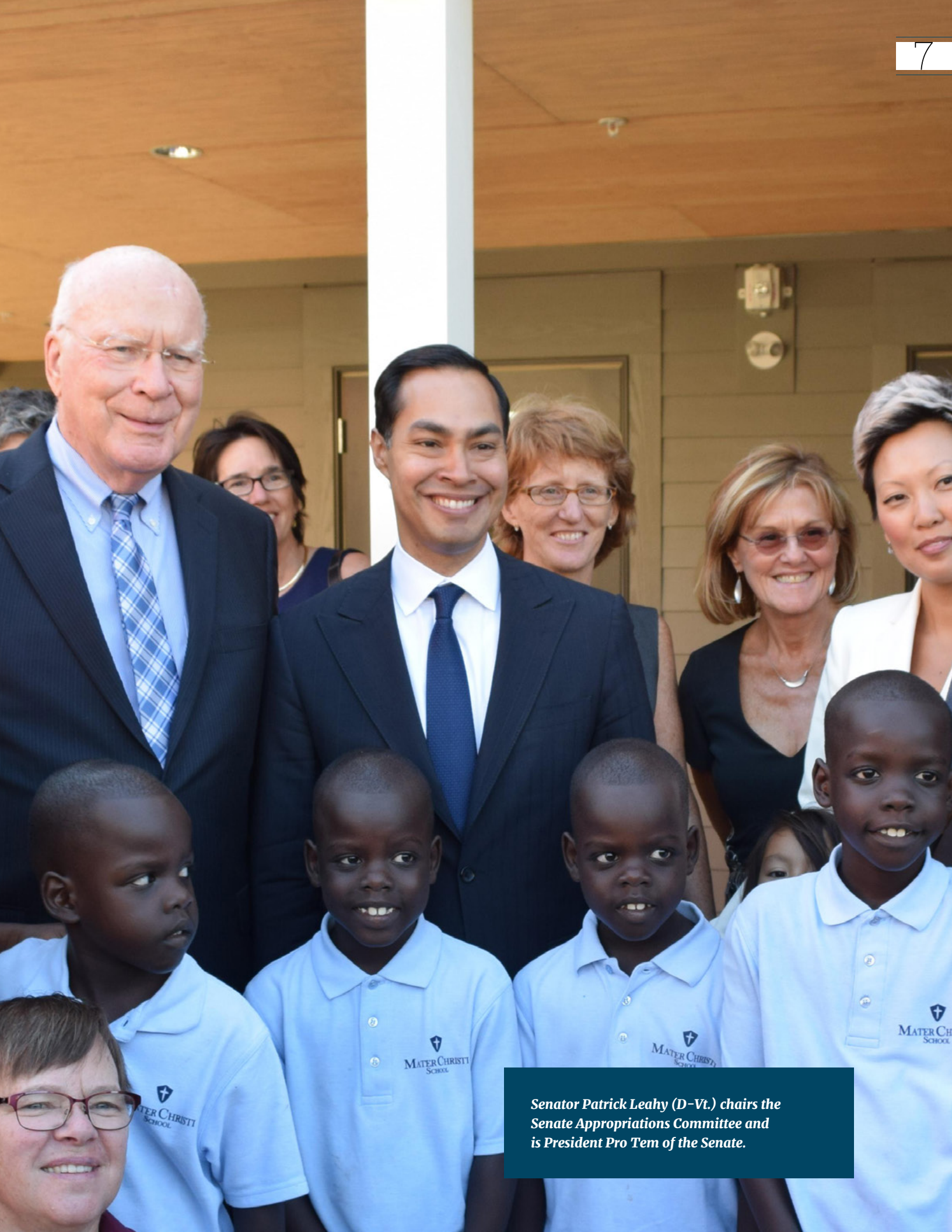
Some of my proudest accomplishments come from furthering the great work that Vermont organizations have started and expanding those innovative policies across the country. In 1984, the land trust now known as the Champlain Housing Trust purchased the first homes for their innovative shared equity program. In a shared equity homeownership program, a community land trust buys a home and the land it sits on, then sells the home to a low-income buyer for a price they can afford. The land trust retains ownership of the land and when the homeowner wishes to sell their home, they retain a portion

of their accrued equity and the rest is reinvested in the home by the land trust, keeping its cost low for the next buyer. There are now more than 600 homes in Champlain Housing Trust's shared equity portfolio, and more than 1,200 sales. The average family receives more than \$25,000 in home equity after the sale of their home. This program in Vermont is a worthy recipient of federal investment, and the concept has the potential to assist communities across the country.

Since becoming Vice Chairman and now Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I have steered federal investments to ensure the replication of the Champlain Housing Trust shared equity model across

the country. Over the past four years, the allocation of \$5 million of funding for technical assistance through government spending bills has expanded the shared equity concept to NeighborWorks affiliates across the country and, starting last year, \$3 million has been invested in helping families realize the dream of homeownership through the purchase of new shared equity homes.

Despite the successes of the past five decades and the pride I take in my legacy of work for rural housing, more than a few challenges remain. I had a chance to deliver a message to attendees at HAC's 50th anniversary celebration last November, where I was asked to consider the biggest challenges and greatest opportunities facing rural housing. As I said then, I continue to believe that the greatest opportunity for rural communities is keeping the way of life that rural residents all love while welcoming new neighbors and growing rural communities. Whether it is helping communities build the infrastructure they need to support affordable rental housing for seniors, championing innovative approaches like shared equity and combining historic preservation and housing, or maintaining proven decades-long programs to give communities flexible housing construction funding, I believe that the future of rural housing, and rural places, is brighter than ever. It is all of our responsibility – Congress, policy makers, residents and advocates – to continue the work to make those vital goals a reality.



Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee and is President Pro Tem of the Senate.

Building on Past Successes for a Bright Future

HAC's CEO considers what needs to be done in the next 50 years.

By David Lipsetz

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC), created in 1971, is celebrating its 50th anniversary. This occasion deserves a review of our accomplishments to date. It also calls us to redouble our work toward a future in which all families in rural America have a safe, decent, and affordable place to call home. Through rural housing, we seek a future where everyone feels connected to their communities and wide recognition that rural America is a vital part of our nation's culture and wealth.

Our past lays the groundwork

Rural America is diverse demographically and economically. Small towns and rural regions can be rich in culture and commerce, yet still face a wide array of challenges in developing their communities and housing. Since our founding, HAC has made it our mission to help build homes and communities across all of rural America, while concentrating our best efforts







exist is often too expensive for locals earning rural-level incomes that run well below the national averages. To address these conditions, HAC has worked with federal, state, and local officials, other national housing groups, and especially with homegrown groups in communities. We have partnered with thousands of local organizations to help create or preserve over 70,000 homes, across all 50 states. With support from a wide variety of funders, we have invested over \$340 million into organizations that build homes in rural communities and provided more than 200,000 hours of training and hundreds of studies, reports and information pieces. HAC's half-century of work has both improved living conditions for rural Americans and increased the capacity of local organizations to address their own communities' challenges. Yet with all that, our work is far from done.

Thinking rural

on meeting the needs of the poorest of the poor in the most rural places, including the southern Black Belt and Lower Mississippi Delta, the southwest border colonias, Native American lands, Central Appalachia, and farmworkers across the country. We have always been aware that persistent poverty is a predominantly rural condition.

While each rural place is unique, HAC has learned over our half-century of work that there are several conditions commonly found in these communities. Decades

of stagnant rural house prices have denied owners the wealth and mobility so often associated with owning a home. Racial inequity is endemic as the result of housing policies and banking practices that excluded people of color and steered investment away from people and places that needed it. Habitable rural housing is in severely short supply.

Rural housing quality has improved since 1971, but far too many rural residents still live with incomplete plumbing or incomplete kitchen facilities, overcrowding, or other serious housing problems. The adequate housing that does

Rural people live in hollers, bayous, and pueblos, stay deep in the woods and high on the hills. Our towns, villages, and countryside require us to lean on each other and sometimes narrow our interests to meet basic and immediate needs. When there are fewer people to shoulder the load, each must carry more of the responsibility to maintain civic functions, build community, and sustain a local economy. It is what the writer Wendell Berry refers to as "membership" in a community, where the necessity of sharing skills, food, and company builds an interdependent reality that benefits all.

The advantage of being small and out-of-the-way does put rural towns and places far from the benefits of most public sector investment. It makes for more vulnerability to exploitation by industries that extract human and natural resources while leaving little profit behind. Yet it is preposterous to think of rural, urban, and suburban America as distinct places. The economies and people are too fully interwoven. We are a system, connected by food, fuel, fiber, services, industry, language, and life. And that is why concentrating wealth and opportunity in any one corner of our system will always hurt the whole.

Today's news says we are going in the wrong direction. Income inequality is worsening. Political divides are deepening. It pains me every time I see the divides described as urban versus rural. It has been 15 years since journalist Bill Bishop observed Americans' "big sort" of clustering into like-minded communities that narrow our connections. And as Professor Simon Levin writes for the National Academy of Sciences, "The loss of diversity associated with polarization undermines cooperation and the ability of societies to provide the public goods that make for a healthy society."

Despite that, I am hopeful the pendulum of history is swinging back toward a less divided America, one that is waking up to the reality that we are all in this system together. To do our part in rural housing to move that hope into reality, HAC has established five long-term policy goals. The goals are broad and ambitious and meant to meet the challenge of our times. We believe achieving them will help move the entire nation toward a more equitable, vibrant, and prosperous future.

Goal 1: Establish housing as a human right

Access to affordable, safe housing is foundational to the success of families and communities. Housing stability contributes to health, education, and economic outcomes, and so much more. Leading up to HAC's founding, the United States signed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), recognizing adequate housing as a component of the human right to an adequate standard of living. This was a non-binding declaration, and we have very obviously fallen short as a country on its intent. In the next 50 years of our work, HAC



HAC has published its biweekly newsletter, the HAC News, since 1972.

hopes to see housing established as a true human right for all Americans through the creation of programs that guarantee the opportunity to own or rent a decent place to call home.

Goal 2: Fully incorporate geographic equity into federal policymaking

Federal programs are often created with urban contexts and structures in mind. When rural areas struggle to access large, complex, "one-size-fits-all" federal programs, it can be challenging. To shoehorn small towns into existing program using imprecise policy adjustments like set-asides and bonus points on applications does not always work. Additionally, a lack of available data makes it challenging to evaluate whether programs are serving under-resourced, persistently poor, or rural places in an equitable way. To address this issue, HAC calls for the federal government to analyze all new legislation, regulation, or data collection efforts to understand how they will impact rural and underserved places.

Goal 3: Elevate rural capacity building as the foundation for successful rural communities

The power of capacity building in rural communities cannot be overstated. Rural communities often have small and part-time local governments, inadequate philanthropic support and a shortage of the specialists needed to navigate the complexities of federal programs and modern housing finance. Targeted capacity building through training and technical assistance is how local organizations learn skills, tap information, and gain the wherewithal to do what they know needs to be done. Rural capacity building receives disproportionately little funding or attention, and certainly is not at a level commensurate with the need. In the

next 50 years, HAC supports the formal establishment and robust funding of one or more national intermediaries for rural housing and community development.

Goal 4: Improve rural access to a variety of capital sources

In recent decades, many rural regions have been stripped of their economic engines, financial establishments, and anchor institutions. Without access to a variety of capital sources, individuals cannot access safe credit or easily buy and sell their homes, businesses cannot grow and serve the needs of

their communities, and ultimately communities' economies cannot thrive. In the next 50 years, HAC supports equitable access in rural communities to financial services and capital, federal funding and tax incentives, and philanthropic giving.

Goal 5: Embed climate-friendly practices into all parts of the housing process

Rural areas, persistently poor regions, and communities of color are deeply and disproportionately impacted by climate change, natural disasters, and environmental conditions that result from systemic inequities. Lack of adequate infrastructure, resilient housing and local capacity hinders rural places in preparing for, withstanding, and recovering from disasters. Complex and cost-prohibitive green building standards challenge rural places looking to make climate-friendly improvements to their built environment. In the next 50 years, HAC supports a transition to localized and climate-friendly housing solutions that decrease the environmental impact of building and make rural housing more resilient in the face of natural disasters.

Addressing future challenges

The challenges rural Americans face have been building for a long while. It will take time to address them. The next 50 years will also bring new challenges on top of the current shortage of decent, affordable housing. The country must recover from the coronavirus pandemic, adapt to climate change, reckon with years of systemically racist housing and economic policies that have disproportionately hurt communities of color, and tackle other obstacles as they arise.

In order to meet the moment, HAC is committed to expanding our efforts. We will do our part to build the capacity of more rural housing providers; increase our lending in hard-to-reach places; offer facts, ideas, and analyses to inform the public and policymakers; and build strategies that improve rural communities.



We will continue to work to bring awareness and balance to national housing policy. We will bring rural sectors together around shared goals, while finding common ground with non-rural interests. We will work for a better future by building and joining coalitions able to root out inequity in all its forms.

At HAC we work hard every day to get to the root of these challenges so we can make broad systems change. We see the power of public policy and public programs to drive change and will continue to advise on how to make them work better for rural America. We will consider ourselves successful in pursuing HAC's vision over the next 50 years every time someone moves into a quality affordable residence and makes it their home.



HAC's Board of Directors visits affordable housing projects in Appalachian Eastern Kentucky in the 1990s.

HAC

Housing Assistance Council



What is your vision for 2071?

During the 2021 National Rural Housing Conference, we asked attendees to share their vision for Rural America in 50 years. We would like to know:
What is your vision for 2071?

Scan the QR code, check out some of the stories about our organizations, and respond to a quick survey about your predictions for 2071.



Survey Results

Future

How respondents think Rural America will look in 2071.

52%

New technology will spread out centers of innovation, including into Rural America

27% Rural America will be a source of food and fuel, disconnected from urban centers

21% Rural America will suffer under little economic opportunity and worse population loss

Prosperity

How respondents rank signs of a prosperous Rural America.

1. Quality jobs, housing, and infrastructure
2. Young people excited to stay and invest in their communities
3. Climate change resilience and environmental sustainability
4. Upward social mobility in poor rural communities. Recognition and investment from the rest of the country. Opportunities for rural youth to stay and invest in their communities
5. Residents empowered to solve their communities' challenges

Challenges

How respondents rank the most pressing issues for Rural America.

1. Loss of rental assistance
2. Too little mortgage lending
3. Not enough quality homes to buy
4. Not enough quality homes to rent
5. Too few skilled tradespeople such as plumbers & electricians
6. Rising cost of building homes and infrastructure

Perception

How respondents predict most Americans will think of Rural America by 2071.

37%

Important to the country's future

33% An engine of economic growth

17% Diverse

13% Distant and disconnected

Over 100 people have responded to the survey so far.
Visit vision2071.org and share your vision.



Vision2071: What do Rural Communities Need to Succeed?

Across the diverse tapestry of rural America, dedicated housing professionals hold an equally diverse set of visions for their communities.

By Mackenzie Webb

Editor's Note: This article is adapted from a longer piece on HAC's anniversary website, vision2071.org.

The year 2071 feels far away, but the work of building the future of rural communities is already in process. HAC asked eight housing leaders to share their visions for their communities and what they need to turn those visions into realities.

Challenges

Solving our communities' challenges begins with identifying the problems. While the obstacles faced by rural communities are as varied as the communities themselves, many share common themes. If rural communities are to thrive over the next 50 years, we need to overcome the challenges of housing affordability, unfulfilled community needs, and gaps of access.

Housing Affordability

More than 6 million rural Americans are housing cost burdened, spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Emilee Powell, Executive Director of Housing Resources of Western Colorado, explained that increased demand for vacation homes in her community has priced out locals, widening the housing gap. The challenge, as she describes it, is that there's not enough money available to invest in all the community's housing needs. While her organization can chip away at this by working on growing the economy more broadly, gradual solutions don't always work because the "problem just changes."

To illustrate the difficulty in preserving and expanding the stock of affordable homes, Gregory Hyson pointed to his organization's work with Amarylis Gardens, an affordable farmworker housing community in Pahokee, Florida. With "limited resources" and "rents that couldn't keep up with the expenses," it was difficult to meet the community's needs.

The affordability problem is acute in California's San Joaquin Valley as well, explains Tom Collishaw, President and CEO of Self-Help Enterprises. Confounding the problem is gentrification, which is displacing residents. With 70 percent of renters paying more than half of their income on housing, housing affordability in California is at a crisis point where many rural communities may soon find themselves. "We are at the leading edge of this," he warns.

Unfulfilled Community Needs

Poor infrastructure and a lack of basic community services pose a key challenge to achieving a thriving future for rural communities. While the specific infrastructure problems vary, several leaders cite roads, sewers, and drinking water as acute problems.

Despite stretching across more than 3,400 square miles, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation has few paved roads, explains Pinky Clifford, Executive Director of the Oglala Sioux Tribe Partnership for Housing. With few homes and persistent housing quality problems, the reservation can't fully meet the housing needs of its residents with the housing stock available. Ashleigh Winans, CEO of NeighborWorks Southern Colorado, frames the problem more broadly as one of unmet basic needs. Ironically, her community is a major agricultural producer that doesn't have enough grocers to meet its own food needs. To compound the problem, many remote communities in southern Colorado are hundreds of miles apart from each other and from the organizations whose services they rely on.

Ines Polonius, CEO of Communities Unlimited, adds that many rural communities she works with across the rural South lack skilled tradespeople to perform vital

functions. Plumbers, electricians, and home inspectors are all needed to keep homes safe and to construct new ones, so without their services, communities struggle.

Gaps of Access

It should be no surprise that rural challenges are felt unequally between communities and within them. Across the country, inequity—on the bases of race, geography, and income—stands as a barrier to fulfilling our visions for rural America.

Jim King of Fahe describes the historical and ongoing underinvestment in Appalachia, Indian Country, and the Mississippi Delta as "willful neglect" and "an intentional act of poverty." As HOPE Enterprise Corporation works on "closing the gaps" so all of its community members can achieve a quality standard of living, they must also "follow the breadcrumbs" to address the causes of that inequity, cautions CEO Bill Bynum.



Poor infrastructure and a lack of basic community services pose a key challenge to achieving a thriving future for rural communities.



Solutions

While these challenges are vexing, the situation is far from hopeless. Building a thriving future for rural communities is possible. The solutions are as varied as the problems themselves, yet many are built on the same core ideas: establishing dedicated funding, building capacity, mitigating climate change, and generating political will.

Establishing Dedicated Funding

Dedicated, consistent funding would help rural housing organizations meet the needs of community members and would also serve as a reliable basis to promote investment in long-term projects. All eight leaders mentioned funding as a crucial part of solving their community's housing challenges. As Emilee Powell explains, she navigates a "patchwork of funding" in the form of government programs and private funding opportunities that come with a variety of requirements and aren't consistent from year to year. The key, she says, is to find a way to transform this patchwork into a cohesive, sustained funding model that is easier to navigate and more reliable for housing organizations.

Bill Bynum notes that housing dollars are most effective when they are targeted closely to the communities who will benefit from them. By channeling that funding directly to nonprofits and localities (rather than state government or federal programs), the money is

spent more effectively and accountably. This will require breaking the cycle where "those with resources determine who get resources," he noted.

Housing intermediaries (such as the Housing Assistance Council) will be an important part of this funding ecosystem, Gregory Hyson adds. Intermediaries have uniquely close relationships with both on-the-ground partners and national funders. This helps target resources where they are needed and line up funding individual groups could not. Overall, this investment, Bynum notes, must take a holistic approach to building communities. Healthcare, housing, education, and the economy are all tied together, so we can't solve the structural problems in one over the next 50 years without also working on the others.

Building Capacity

Building the capacity of rural housing organizations would help them achieve their visions, rural housing leaders say. Expanding the number of homes these groups can construct or rehab, improving their ability to raise and use funding, and expanding their skills would all help housers better serve their neighbors.

Ines Polonius also highlights the importance of building the skills of community members. From plumbers to electricians to inspectors, skilled tradespeople will all play a vital role in achieving our visions for rural America.

Mitigating Climate Change

Rural communities will not thrive in 2071 if we haven't mitigated a problem that looms over the entire planet: climate change. By preventing the worst of climate change and responding to its effects, rural communities will be stronger and more resilient.

As Gregory Hyson explains, climate change poses a challenge to his work housing residents of south Florida, a hurricane-prone region that has been experiencing more powerful storms. Even aside from extreme weather, "there have been more extreme heat days" and higher humidity.

Continued on page 30



LET'S BUILD SOMETHING TOGETHER



NEED CAPITAL FOR YOUR AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROJECT?

The Housing Assistance Council's Loan Funds provide low interest rate loans to support single and multifamily affordable housing projects for low-income, rural residents throughout the United States and territories.

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Small town Alton, Mo., deep in the rugged Ozark Mountains of Oregon County, is supported by the Alton Community Foundation. This regional affiliate of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks brings a host of charitable resources to the rural county. Photo by Aaron Scott.



Building an Abundance Mindset for the Rural Future

A Missouri nonprofit offers a new way of thinking to ensure rural growth.

By Brian Fogle

I saw him staring at it too. The nearly empty platter of boiled shrimp. Then she noticed and headed towards the table. It was into the second hour of the reception, and probably everyone there had eaten some shrimp. But this was desperate—they were nearly out. Do I run over there? How many can I stuff in my pockets? He saw me eyeing the merchandise, and she shot a glimpse my way that said, “Back off, buddy.” It was all going to blow.

Then came the server with an entirely new tray, filled with a mound of steaming crustaceans reaching to the ceiling. Everyone sighed and smiled. She grabbed three plates and handed one each to the other guy and me. “Grab some shrimp,” she said cheerily. “After you,” he said. We all chatted about how nice the reception was and exchanged pleasantries and business cards. Mortal enemies became acquaintances. I have seen that exact same look when I have visited one of our rural communities in our region to talk about community foundations. Arms and legs crossed, skepticism in their eyes. They have heard this story before—how we are from out of town, and we’re here to save your community. Just recently I had a conversation with a regional organization that was discussing partnering with us. They mentioned to me that they “all are pretty much on board, except maybe two.” I said, “Let me guess...they’re from small towns.” “How did you know that?” came the surprised reply.

Community Foundation of the Ozarks (CFO) covers 60 counties in southern Missouri, so the largest part of our geography is rural. Fifty years ago, when CFO started, the region’s small towns had packed Main Streets and plentiful jobs at shoe and garment factories, and the baby boom was in full swing filling our schools. Our banquet tables seemed heaping with boiled shrimp. Over the past half-century, though, so many of our resources have been extracted, and understandably we have devolved into a scarcity mentality. We feel we have to hold on for dear life to what we have, or we will lose that, too. The thought being do not work with that outside agency or the community down the road. They may take away what is left. As I was describing what a community foundation was in one rural community, a person on the front row raised

their hand and said, “This sounds like a Ponzi scheme to me!” He couldn’t understand how we genuinely tried to grow generosity in their community, and not take from it. I have long since quit being defensive. I see it in my own hometown.

I know there is a tendency to see things in a rose-colored rearview mirror, but I do have such fond memories of growing up in a small Ozarks town in the 1960s. Just on our main street alone, we had three hardware stores, two jewelry stores, two dime stores, two furniture stores, and even two men’s clothing stores. The only criticism I heard my parents mention about our downtown was a lack of parking. Seems like everyone complained about a lack of parking. Well, a half century later, we finally fixed that problem with empty storefronts. No wonder we are so fierce about not letting anything else be taken from us.

But what if there is more? What if we can change from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset? Just in the last year, CFO saw estate gifts in our small communities totaling more than \$20 million. We have seen towns rally together and fix up deteriorating properties, paint tired facades, and pick up cluttered roadways. It

The Growth in the Rural Ozarks (GRO) grant-funded initiative focuses on rural economic development in communities that do not have full-time chambers of commerce for that role. The original GRO communities—Marshfield, Salem and Sarcoxie, Mo.—gathered as a cohort to exchange ideas. Photo by Aaron Scott.





Members of the early cohorts of the Ozarks Teacher Corps, pictured at an annual convening in Willow Springs, Mo. Since its inception in 2010, members have gone on to become school administrators and community leaders beyond their initial three-year commitments to teach in a rural district in exchange for a two-year scholarship. Photo by Aaron Scott.

is hard to reach out our hands and be welcoming when we are desperately clutching what we have. Worrying about leftovers is not a winning strategy. We can only fill our tables by working together, reaching out, and welcoming those people and organizations that aren't there to steal the last shrimp, but bring in more.

I have worked with rural communities for most of my career. Forty years ago, I first traveled the same highways and byways I travel today calling on community banks. Later I ran the rural initiative of a major coast-to-coast

bank and visited rural areas from Appalachia to the Delta to the Rancherias in the west. Although each region has its unique challenges and opportunities, there are also many similarities. For the rural areas that are growing, I have observed some commonalities.

Let go of the past. In the Ozarks, we'll never have shoe factories or garment factories in every community. Since globalization spread and retail changed, my hometown will never see the variety along its main street again. But many small communities have re-invented themselves

with tourism, as attractive places to retire, or embracing alternative agriculture and local foods.

Keep local schools strong. The local school system is usually the center of gravity for a small community that has still retained a local school. Often it is the largest employer, and on Friday night it is the community's sense of pride and entertainment. CFO launched the Rural Schools Partnership (RSP) in 2010 to help our rural communities maintain and improve their local schools.

RSP was built upon three pillars. First, we aim to create additional financial support over and above the tax base by creating philanthropic assets for local educational needs. We now work with over 50 school foundations that offer financial support for a myriad of needs that local taxes may not be able to cover.

Second, we have a grantmaking program that supports place-based education in our rural K-12 schools. We provided a grant to help one community turn an abandoned fire station into a student-run coffee house. In another community, a local Spanish Club became the town's recycling entity, helping the environment, and helping students with after-school and summer jobs.

Finally, we started and funded the Ozarks Teacher Corps, which gives scholarships to rising junior and senior education majors in the colleges and universities in our region, who agree to teach in a rural school for at least three years. We have had over 100 students go through that program, and over 80 percent

are still teaching in rural schools.

"There's gold in them hills!"

The U.S. is currently in the largest transfer of wealth in the history of humankind as the greatest generation and even baby boomers are passing away and leaving their wealth to their heirs. It is happening in rural areas at an even faster pace, as the average age in rural America is higher than in urban areas. Unless we are deliberate in talking to residents, the generations of financial resources built up in a community can leave it for good as heirs move away. I mentioned earlier the more than \$20 million in estate gifts in very rural areas. Those didn't happen by accident. Those discussions happened years ago with both the

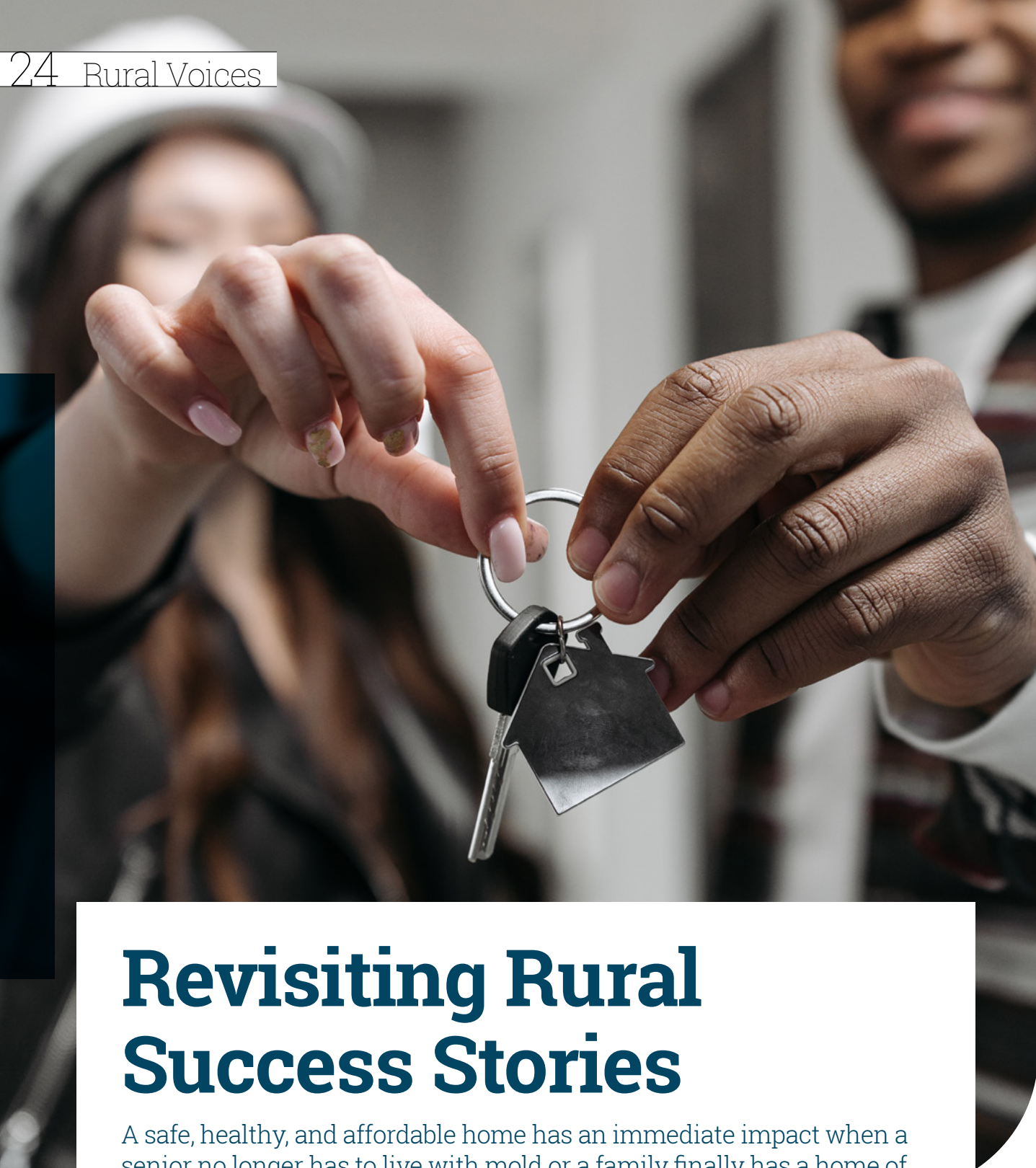
potential donors and their professional advisors about the legacy one can leave behind to a community they love.

Build an oval, not a drag strip. We have done a good job in our rural areas of providing pathways out via scholarships and encouragement to "spread your wings," but, in most cases, neglected to mention that those young people will always have a place and be welcomed back to their hometown. Several of our rural communities have created apprenticeship programs with businesses and institutions where high school students learn a career and stay connected throughout college to keep their hometown present in their minds and hearts. A couple of other communities provide mailboxes to each graduating high school senior with the name of the community to remind them where their home is.

Marianne Williamson said, "The key to abundance is meeting limited circumstances with unlimited thoughts." We can continue to clench our hands in fear or open our minds and arms into a new vision of our future. I hope that vision includes heaping mounds of boiled shrimp.

"The key to abundance is meeting limited circumstances with unlimited thoughts."

Brian Fogle is President and CEO at Community Foundation of the Ozarks.



Revisiting Rural Success Stories

A safe, healthy, and affordable home has an immediate impact when a senior no longer has to live with mold or a family finally has a home of their own. But, many of the effects reveal themselves over the course of decades. That's why we are revisiting success stories from the Housing Assistance Council's 50 years of helping build rural communities. Our homes shape our lives and our communities for generations to come. Decades after they concluded, these projects in Alamosa, Colorado, and Concordia Parish, Louisiana, continue to positively impact their communities—places where HAC still works.

By Mackenzie Webb

Alamosa, Colorado

Over 600 billion gallons of water flow through the Rio Grande every year. In Alamosa, Colorado, however, the river is narrow enough to skip rocks across. Alamosa lies in southern Colorado's San Luis Valley just south of the river's headwaters. Almost 10,000 people call Alamosa home.

Since 1971, Community Resources and Housing Development Corporation (CRHDC) has served the housing needs of Alamosa and the entire San Luis Valley. But, in 1997, CRHDC had a problem: they ran out of land.

Like many rural affordable housing organizations, CRHDC operated a self-help housing program with financing from the Housing Assistance Council (HAC). Under the self-help model, new homeowners help build their homes. This

"sweat equity" takes the place of a traditional cash down-payment, keeping costs low and making the home more affordable. At first, HAC helped CRHDC fund scattered-site development, forming a patchwork of affordable homes across Alamosa. But, by the late 1990s, the limited supply of available lots in city limits had been exhausted. This left CRHDC with only one viable option: building a subdivision in a previously undeveloped side of town.

CRHDC had never built a subdivision before, but we were eager to help them learn to solve the challenges this new type of development would pose. HAC regularly provides both loans and technical assistance to support self-help housing construction across rural America. Plus, many of our self-help loans are up to 90% forgivable if the project's production goals are met. In 1998, we lent \$300,000 to fund the subdivision's construction—the plan called for forty homes, roads to connect them, and utilities to keep them livable. With our lending, CRHDC's vision, and homebuyers' hard work, a subdivision known as El Milagro was born.



Over the next four years, an empty parcel of land was built into a neighborhood. To this day Janet Lucero, CRHDC's Director of Single-Family Development, runs into the El Milagro families all around Alamosa. They're proud of the homes they built—that's why Janet still gets invited to see their landscaping, remodeling, and add-ons.

HAC takes pride in helping community organizations grow their capacity to serve their neighbors. HAC partnered with CRHDC to build the capacity of their farm labor housing program while it was still in its early stages. Today, CRHDC provides similar technical assistance to other housing organizations' farm labor programs.

El Milagro was a turning point for CRHDC. When asked where his organization would be if it weren't for El Milagro, CRHDC's Executive Director Arturo Alvarado said that "it's hard to imagine CRHDC today if it weren't for that subdivision." The lessons learned, the results realized, and the new form of development renewed CRHDC's capacity for impact.

HAC's loan and the subdivision it helped build have touched far more lives than those of the 40 families who built their homes. Alamosa has grown considerably over the last two decades, with new development bringing more opportunity to the town's residents. The El Milagro neighborhood has grown into a community. Developing affordable homes throughout Alamosa has helped the entire town. "The side of town we build on is the side that's growing," noted Curtis Schneider, Director of Accounting and Finance for CRHDC. In addition to economic opportunity, El Milagro has brought quality of life improvements to Alamosa. As Alvarado noted, they "build more than homes." CRHDC builds communities where children can play, where families can grow, and where life can be lived. Over the last few years, the City of Alamosa has even invested in two new parks near CRHDC-built communities.

HAC is proud to have been a part of El Milagro's development. As HAC's Director of Lending Eileen Neely



Over the next four years, an empty parcel of land was built into a neighborhood.



pointed out, “Investing in affordable homes doesn’t just help the families who live in them. It also builds the community and the capacity of groups like CRHDC. They’re a great example of the principle we see with our partners across rural America.”

HAC’s and CRHDC’s work is as necessary as ever. Over the last decade, Alamosa has grown considerably, but new home construction hasn’t kept pace. A recent housing needs assessment found that Alamosa needs over 540 new affordable homes to meet current demand. This lack of affordable homes has become so drastic that CRHDC regularly works with families who’ve qualified for mortgages as high as \$250,000 but who cannot find any homes for sale at that price. At the same time, rising costs for building materials have pushed CRHDC’s construction prices up 20% in the last two years alone.

Amazingly, over the last decade, one in ten new homes built in the San Luis Valley were built by CRHDC.

Today, CRHDC is still going strong. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, “we never stopped building,” Alvarado explained. Across Alamosa and the entire San Luis Valley, HAC’s and CRHDC’s impact is evident. It’s felt when self-help families thank CRHDC staff at title companies, construction suppliers, diners, and hotels. It’s there every winter when affordable housing construction continues in the snow long after others have stopped for the season. Building homes is “more than just four walls. It touches every aspect of a community,” Alvarado noted. At HAC, we believe that building affordable homes strengthens entire communities. El Milagro is proof of this principle in action.

Macon Ridge, Louisiana

Since 1995, Macon Ridge Community Development Corporation (CDC) has helped low-income residents of Concordia Parish, Louisiana, access affordable, quality homes. Located on the west bank of the Mississippi River, the rural parish is home to more than 2,000 households who live in inadequate housing. About a third of Concordia Parish residents live below the poverty line, including 43% of children.

Like many housing nonprofits, Macon Ridge was founded on a passion for service and a vision for the community's future. To Eddie Ray Jackson, Macon Ridge's Executive Director, the mission is straightforward: "I want to see people do better, to live in a good home where they can still pay the bills." But Macon Ridge needed help

to make their vision a reality. In 2001, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) awarded Macon Ridge a \$22,400 technical assistance grant through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI), paired with one-on-one technical assistance to grow Macon Ridge's capacity. Over the next three years, HAC assisted Macon Ridge with preparing draft budgets, helped strengthen organizational practices, and provided expert guidance on the programs with which Macon Ridge was working. As Jackson remembers, the skills they learned from HAC's technical assistance "kept us afloat."

One major area of focus for HAC's technical assistance was on Macon Ridge's single-family homeownership



program. In addition to the financial and physical security a home provides, homeownership can be a powerful tool helping families build wealth. In addition to sharing our own expertise, we invited Macon Ridge to a peer exchange hosted by Self-Help Enterprises (SHE), a housing organization in Visalia, California, that has built more than 6,000 single-family self-help homes. The exchange allowed Macon Ridge's team to learn skills from expert peers.

HAC also encouraged Macon Ridge's leadership and staff to connect with other rural housing practitioners from across the country by attending HAC's biennial National Rural Housing Conference. Jackson credits the network Macon Ridge developed at this conference with making it possible for them to receive a \$300,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Rural Innovation Fund. The award financed the construction of 10 new single-family homes, along with homebuyer education for 150 people. As these affordable homes were completed, Macon Ridge sold them at-cost to low-income families and recycled the funds into the construction of additional units. This system allowed Macon Ridge to multiply its impact.

By 2003, Macon Ridge was building or rehabbing an average of 35 quality, affordable homes per year. "Macon Ridge brought new single-family homes to towns that hadn't seen new construction in 20 years," remembers Andres Saavedra, a former HAC board member who worked with Macon Ridge through the Local Initiatives Support Corporation. But they didn't rest on their laurels.

As the housing needs of the area evolved, so did Macon Ridge. By 2015, Macon Ridge realized that most of its potential clients needed better credit scores before homeownership was the right choice. As Jackson explains, there are "only so many homes you can sell." So, Macon Ridge pivoted from homebuyer units to rental.

Over a third of Concordia Parish's residents rely on Social Security benefits or other public assistance. As Eddie Ray Jackson notes, for many of these fixed-income residents, renting makes more sense than buying. Since Macon Ridge had less experience managing rental properties, they partnered with HAC again for our 2015 round of

RCDI technical assistance. Over the next three years, HAC worked with Macon Ridge, providing technical assistance and training on scattered site development for rental and assistance with applications for grants from the Louisiana Housing Corporation.

Jackson credits Macon Ridge's long-lasting relationship with HAC for the organization's longevity: "HAC has been there since day one." In over 20 years in affordable housing, Eddie Ray Jackson has seen housing organizations come and go. But thanks in part to technical assistance and training from HAC, he proudly proclaims, "we're still here."

Of the roughly 9,400 homes in Concordia Parish, Macon Ridge CDC built or rehabbed over 300. This accomplishment is made even more impressive by the over 200 additional homes they developed in neighboring parishes. As HAC's director of Training & Technical Assistance, Shonterria Charleston notes, "When we invest in and build the capacity of nonprofit organizations like Macon Ridge, entire communities are strengthened. A single high-capacity organization has the ability to positively impact communities and change hundreds of lives for the better." HAC's goal is to empower rural communities with the knowledge, skills, capital, and information they need to ensure everyone has an affordable home. Macon Ridge CDC has used those tools to make the entire parish a better place to call home.



Mackenzie Webb is the External Affairs Associate at the Housing Assistance Council.

Continued from page 18

“Those hazards that exist have accumulated” in older homes, with more mold and mildew and more need for repairs, he notes. The benefits of climate change mitigation extend beyond this crisis. As Pinky Clifford explains, environmental protection can create new green jobs and a sustainable economy to pass on to future generations. If the current path is “deterioration,” she notes, addressing climate change can help rural communities change course.

Generating Political Will

Every solution so far relies upon political will. Without it, funding isn’t dedicated, capacity is left to wither, and climate change goes unchecked. Political will is also necessary to combat NIMBYism, a key obstacle to new construction of affordable housing. As Pinky Clifford puts it, “we are all in this together.” Solving the challenges before rural communities requires all of us—urban, suburban, and rural alike—to come together.

Political will isn’t needed just at the national level. As Ashleigh Winans points out, we also need “how we behave societally” to shift. The real solution, she notes, will come when community members join to solve problems locally. Coming together in our communities and between them will be the foundation of building the future we imagine for rural America in 2071.

Vision

Housing for all is a major through line in the tapestry of goals shared by rural leaders, though many have even more ambitious visions for meeting their communities’ housing and community development needs. Tom Collishaw’s goal, for example, is for 100 percent of community members in the San Joaquin Valley to have stable housing, with none paying more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. This, as he points out, is also a vision for ending homelessness.

Jim King envisions a pathway to broader growth. Over the next 10 years, Fahe plans to work on “our down payment on the American dream,” rapidly increasing its investment in Appalachia by raising more funds and getting them out into communities. It is also hard at work changing the narrative of rural communities and building a bigger tent, with room for more voices willing to work together for Appalachia.

Ines Polonius also has a broad vision of a thriving community: young people returning to rural America, bringing their skills, talents, and passion. They can do this only if rural places are affordable and if there’s enough housing that teachers in small towns don’t have to drive two hours to get to work, she notes. Ashleigh Winans hopes her organization will be so effective at building community that in 50 years, NeighborWorks Southern Colorado won’t be

needed. Little wins are part of the legacy Emilee Powell hopes to leave—helping a family find housing, weatherizing a home, replacing a woodstove with safer heating. Every little win adds up to make the community stronger and leaves behind a legacy of service.

While housing is certainly a central theme in most of the leaders’ visions for their communities, it is never the entire story. For example, Bill Bynum views housing as one part of a broader vision for empowering community members. He hopes his legacy will be 90 percent voter turnout, evidence that community members feel in control of their destiny and able to solve the problems they face together.

Conclusion

Rural housers across the country all have unique views on what it will mean for their communities to thrive, yet all agree that thriving is the goal. HAC’s CEO David Lipsetz summed up our vision:

I envision rural communities that are energized and vibrant. I envision rural communities where no one must worry about the electric bill or whether they’re going to lose their house. Communities where there are safe and affordable places to call home and to raise a family. I envision communities where education, healthcare, housing, jobs, and more all work together to make life better. I envision communities where there’s opportunity, where there are people of all ages, where people can truly, deeply know each other. I envision an intimate sense of community that makes people feel connected to each other. The vision housers share is attainable. Establishing dedicated funding, building capacity, mitigating climate change, and generating political will all combine to offer a path forward. If we choose to, we as a country have the power to put every rural housing organization out of business by building the communities we all deserve to live in. But it isn’t just a question of what rural places need. As Jim King posed it, the real question is, “What would it take to be a better country?”



HAC FACTS

HAC NAMES JONATHAN HARWITZ DIRECTOR OF POLICY

HAC is pleased to announce the hiring of Jonathan Harwitz as HAC's new Director of Policy. He brings years of experience working with policymakers on affordable housing issues. Jonathan will spearhead and expand HAC's place as the national source for independent, non-partisan policy solutions for rural housing and community development. He was most recently the Director of Housing Community Development and Insurance Policy for the House Financial Services Committee. He has also held policy-related positions at the Low Income Investment Fund, a large national CDFI; HUD; and the Corporation for Supportive Housing. Learn more about HAC's policy work at

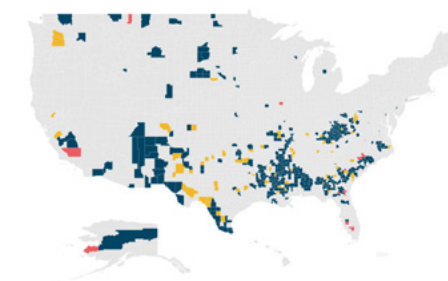
<https://ruralhome.org/our-work/policy/>



HAC AWARDS OVER \$2.8 MILLION FOR SELF-HELP HOMEOWNERSHIP PROGRAMS

HAC has selected 17 organizations to receive more than \$2.8 million in loans to build 190 self-help homes for low- and moderate-income families. Financed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Self-Help Homeownership Opportunity Program, our loans are 90% forgivable if production goals are met. Under the self-help model, homebuyers help build their home, keeping costs more affordable. For many families, the "sweat equity" they earn is the only viable path to homeownership and the wealth-building that a home can provide. Since the inception of the SHOP program, HAC's local partners have completed 9,805 homes. Learn more about HAC's Loan Fund at

<https://ruralhome.org/our-work/lending>



● Not Persistent Poverty County in 2020 or 2010 ● Persistent Poverty County in 2010 and 2020
● Persistent Poverty County in 2020, not in 2010 ● Persistent Poverty County in 2010, not in 2020

PERSISTENT POVERTY ESTIMATES UPDATED

A new Rural Research Brief from HAC estimates that in 2020 there were 377 U.S. counties and county equivalents where poverty rates remained at 20% or more for three consecutive decades. Of these, 81% are located outside metropolitan areas. For the first time, HAC also calculated persistent poverty status for Puerto Rico; including that territory, there are a total of 455 Persistent Poverty Counties, home to more than 4.6 million Americans. While 70 counties moved off the persistent poverty list in 2020, approximately 78% of Persistent Poverty Counties in 2020 have been in this status consistently since 1980. Learn more and read the Rural Research Brief at

<https://ruralhome.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/rural-research-brief-persistent-poverty-2021.pdf>



Housing Assistance Council

1025 Vermont Avenue, NW
Suite 606
Washington, DC 20005

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Managing Editor: Lance George

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