

## **Why does REACH promote the idea that housing is a human right?**

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Some time ago the REACH team adopted, as our foundational value, the idea that housing is a human right. How did we come to this point of view? Our target population are people experiencing chronic homelessness. Since 2015 each winter, until prevented by COVID in 2020, we created a winter home for some of this population. Our social work team did their very best to find permanent accommodation for many of our guests, but it was difficult. There just is not enough safe and supportive housing affordable for people who are living on SSI or other very low-income sources.

We began to ask ourselves what can be done to make it easier for our guests to find housing? Public assistance in the way of rental assistance either had a long waiting list (Section 8 housing) or many landlords would not accept DHS emergency rapid rehousing allowances. And while we were successful in placing 40% or more into permanent housing, it became very clear to us that there was a housing crisis for the very poor in our community.

We learned that no one was building for people living below 30% of the AMI. In fact, one developer said that there is no way to build for people who did not have 60% or more of the area median income. Then we looked at the statistics gathered by the National Low-Income Housing Coalition and found that in Rochester, for every 100 individuals or families on very low income there were only 33 housing units available.<sup>1</sup> Clearly market forces were not going to address the problem of the gap between very low-income people and the cost of rent in our city.

Many of our guests suffer from mental illness and/or ongoing addiction issues that limits their capacity to improve their situation. While none of us want to go back to criminalizing those who suffer from mental and/or addictive disorders by locking them up, we believe that there must be a more humane way to house our guests. We also realized that our guests would be so much more able to improve their lives if they had safe, supportive, and truly affordable houses or apartments.

As we researched the history of housing in the US, we recalled that President Roosevelt in his 1944 State of the Union address to Congress spoke of every American having the right to a home<sup>2</sup>, and shortly thereafter, the United Nations declared that Housing is a Human Right.<sup>3</sup>

To say that housing is a human right is to link housing to those essential aspects of human living that we in the past century have come to realize are basic rights, such as the right to vote, the

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<sup>1</sup> The GAP: A Shortage of Affordable Homes, National Low Income Housing Coalition, March 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "'Simply Unacceptable': Homelessness and the Human Right to Housing in the United States 2011," (Washington DC: National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, June 2011). p 16

<sup>3</sup> Article 25, Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

right to be freed from slavery, the right to an education, to health, to marry whomever one loves, to be treated with respect and dignity, and so on. Why not speak of housing as a human right, a right to be protected and supported by judicial and governmental agency? This pursuit of human rights is natural to our history—as a nation we have worked at ever expanding our understanding of human rights.

So, REACH became REACH Advocacy with the hope that we could help to change the narrative around housing. Housing, as we came to understand it, is not simply a matter of capital wealth, housing is the basis of how we create our homes. As we served our guests, we came to believe that every human being has the right to have housing that he or she could make into a home.

What is next? REACH is planning to build a Tiny Home Village which, with appropriate support staff, will give our guests the opportunity to create their own homes. As we turn houses or apartments into homes, we do several things for ourselves. Here are three very briefly described values to homemaking: First, and central is that we express our identity as we fill the home with memories to tell our story; Second, our home becomes a place of celebration of this identity as we entertain and form relationships with our neighbors; and Third, our home provide security, stability, and a sense of belonging.

REACH is committed to the notion that every person has a right to this opportunity to create a home for themselves and society must ensure that truly affordable housing is available for all our neighbors. So, we continue to change the narrative around housing. And we invite all our supporters to join in helping with this campaign. There are several ways you can do this:

- Begin a discussion group in your faith community to explore this topic.
- Let your political leaders know of your support for the creation of truly affordable housing.
- Write a letter to the editor about the housing crisis and the need for greater options for the very poor to be able to find housing.
- Join groups that are trying to change the narrative around housing, among those are:
  - [REACH Advocacy](#)
  - [City Roots Community Land Trust](#)
  - Rochester Homeless Union
  - [Vocal New York](#), while mostly focused on NYC, there is a local chapter in Rochester.
- Follow online organizations that seek to improve housing justice in the US, among those are:
  - [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)
  - [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#)
  - [Upstate/Downstate Housing Alliance](#)

Housing is a human right! Keep the conversation alive and louder