



A PROGRAM OF THE FORD FOUNDATION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE ADVOCACY INSTITUTE AND THE ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

## FIVE MYTHS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS AND THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS

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Among the Leadership for a Changing World awardees available for interview are the following practical visionaries, working in diverse settings — from inner cities to rural areas — against homelessness and for affordable housing:

**Myth: Providing Low-Income Housing Strains Local Economies.**

**Fact: Affordable Housing Projects Rebuild Communities and Create Economic Opportunities.**

**Brenda Torpy, Mary Houghton**, (VT), Co-Directors, Burlington Community Land Trust, are available for interviews: (802) 862-6244, btorpy@bclt.net, mhoughton@bclt.net, www.bclt.net. Urban leaders around the country are showing increased interest in alternative ways to provide affordable housing; at the same time, employers are scrambling to find ways to house workers within commuting range. To meet these challenges, Burlington has emerged as a working laboratory. Increasingly seen as a national model, the program demonstrates how individually-owned homes on community-owned land can guarantee lower-than-market price for decades to come.

Organized in 1984 as a self-help community development organization, B.C.L.T. set out to revitalize core neighborhoods in Burlington and to provide permanently affordable housing for the region. It has since become one of the largest community land trusts in the nation, with a portfolio of 250 homeownership properties, 250 rental units, 65 cooperative homes and five community facilities serving low income people. Many of these units, homes and facilities are renovated houses or warehouses; some are located on cleaned up toxic sites. B.C.L.T. provides grants to income-eligible buyers that greatly reduce the cost of purchasing a home. Under the sales agreement, the buyers own the house; the Trust owns the land. The buyers also receive a course in home ownership. B.C.L.T. now owns and operates the region's Homeownership Center, where realtors, bankers, attorneys, and housing inspectors volunteer at homeownership training workshops. Urban leaders across the nation view B.C.L.T.'s successful methods as one of several possible solutions to the affordable-housing crisis.

**Brad Lander**, Executive Director; **Michelle de la Uz**, Co-Chair; **Linda Techell (NY)**, Co-Chair, Fifth Avenue Committee, Inc., are available for interviews: (718) 857-2990 x16, [blander@fifthave.org](mailto:blander@fifthave.org),

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[www.fifthave.org](http://www.fifthave.org). Lander grew up outside St. Louis, where he witnessed the demolition of the Pruitt Igoe high-rise public housing project 30 years ago, signaling the end of “low-income housing as we knew it,” as he describes in an attached op-ed column (available for publication). “Pruitt Igoe represented twin evils: arrogant large-scale planning and the supposed vices of poor communities. A generation later, we have reinvented affordable housing. Instead of high-rise towers, we develop attractive buildings that strengthen communities. Many are built by ‘community development corporations,’ or C.D.C.s, non-profits run by local residents that rebuild communities and create opportunities.... It is a remarkable story of community leadership.”

Lander now leads the Fifth Avenue Committee in South Brooklyn, a vibrantly diverse New York neighborhood whose quality housing stock is attracting an influx of wealthier residents. The Committee has redeveloped 600 units of affordable housing for low- and very-low-income people, with residents now collectively owning most of these units. After first focusing on preserving and constructing affordable housing, Lander realized he could best help the neighborhood — and preserve its diversity and its remarkable mix of housing, small businesses and religious and civic institutions — by branching into economic development work: welfare rights, job placement and training and other social justice campaigns.

**Rev. Dr. Tyrone Hicks, Carmen Mirazo, Rev. Cornelius Taylor**, Co-chairs; **Larry Ferlazzo (CA)**, Lead Organizer, The Sacramento Valley Organizing Committee, are available for interviews: (916) 457-0245, [svoc1@pacbell.net](mailto:svoc1@pacbell.net), [www.sacvoc.org](http://www.sacvoc.org). When these leaders formed the Committee, an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (I.A.F.) founded by Saul Alinsky, they realized that creating more anti-poverty programs, alone, would not close the growing economic gap between California’s Central Valley and the rest of the state. They decided that life would not improve until those most touched by hardship were fully engaged in the democratic process of change. Their organization has brought job-training programs and improved immigration services to thousands of mostly Latino and African-American low-income people.

S.V.O.C. leaders recently wrote, “On one level, we could say a major accomplishment has been building 300 homes that very-low-income families were able to purchase. But the real accomplishment was that thousands of low-income people led and participated in those campaigns to get the homes. For many of them it was the first time they participated in public life. This awakening has changed the power dynamics in several communities that have seen what an organized and disciplined force of low-income people can accomplish.”

**Myth: Homelessness Is Exclusively an Inner City Problem.**

**Fact: Rural Homelessness and Substandard Housing Are Growing, Requiring Rural Solutions.**

**Gerry Roll (KY)**, Executive Director, Hazard Perry County Community Ministries, is available for interviews: (606) 436-2662, [gerry@hpccm.org](mailto:gerry@hpccm.org), [www.hpccm.org](http://www.hpccm.org). Contrary to the myth that homelessness is confined to cities, it is a real problem in many rural areas. Roll, who has herself experienced being evicted, battles for the rural homeless in Hazard, Ky., an isolated town in the heart of the Appalachian coalfields, where 27 percent of residents live in poverty and devastating trailer fires often leave families homeless. To achieve self-sufficiency, they need more than affordable housing — they also need high-quality, affordable childcare, good-paying jobs and decent health care, she says. “When it comes to homelessness, you can’t talk about housing without talking about other services — the continuum of care. This is what we mean by *supportive* housing.”

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Roll brought her community together to create a homeless shelter that provides food and family support services, not just shelter, to more than 1,500 people a year. She has developed a transitional housing program that provides a continuum of care for families transitioning from homelessness to self-sufficiency, and even to home ownership. Her rural demonstration and evaluation program improves access to health care, social services and housing through a partnership of more than 50 local providers. Roll participates in national training programs to encourage other communities to adopt similarly innovative efforts. Her most recent battle is with media: CBS is auditioning real, poorly educated families from rural America, including Kentucky, and plans to select one to put on display in a Beverly Hills mansion as part of a new reality-based program called *Real Beverly Hillbillies*. “Not only do our programs face cuts, but we’re being laughed at. We can do better.”

**Ruth Wise (VA)**, Executive Director, New Road Community Development Group of Exmore, Inc., is available for interviews: (757) 442-3797, [nrcdg@intercom.net](mailto:nrcdg@intercom.net). Wise grew up in the New Road neighborhood of Exmore, Va., where until last year, 85 percent of around 300 African-American residents lacked indoor plumbing. “We realized that unless we stood up and spoke out for ourselves, the New Road community would enter the next century under the same living conditions,” says Wise. Her Group initially banded together to demand that local government officials provide indoor water and sewer services. But since most residents were renters, even though their families had long lived in the area, she says, “if our efforts to bring a sewer system to the community succeeded, the greater benefit would accrue to the landlords who owned the houses. We struck upon the ‘wild’ idea of buying out the landlords” — and purchasing 15 acres of farmland and woods.

Wise’s Group subdivided and sold the land to residents. The Group has overseen the installation of a community-wide sewer system; arranged employment opportunities for unemployed community residents; sold 16 lots to first-time homebuyers; rehabbed 10 units for new and existing homeowners with indoor plumbing and heating; and constructed 12 new units. Because similar very-low-wealth pockets persist in other areas of the country, replicating this approach elsewhere could profoundly improve many people’s lives.

**Myth: Homelessness and AIDS Are Separate Challenges.**

**Truth: As AIDS Patients Live Longer, They Need a Growing Supply of Supportive Housing.**

**Betsy Lieberman (WA)**, Executive Director, AIDS Housing of Washington, is available for interviews: (206) 322-9444, [betsy@aidshousing.org](mailto:betsy@aidshousing.org), [www.aidshousing.org](http://www.aidshousing.org). Lieberman describes an invisible housing crisis, and how to meet the challenge. “The good news is that Americans with HIV/AIDS are living longer and, in general, can look forward to better health than in the past, thanks to new drug therapies,” she writes in another attached op-ed column (also available for publication). “But as life expectancies increase, they — still battling for their lives — face a dramatic shortage in affordable housing, especially housing with supportive services. In short, without national action, today’s healthier HIV/AIDS patients could become tomorrow’s homeless.”

Through collaborative partnerships with mainstream housing providers and AIDS service organizations, Lieberman’s group has built one residence with 35 skilled nursing beds and day health services for people with late-stage AIDS-related illnesses, as well as another with 64 units of supportive housing for people living with AIDS who have extensive histories of homelessness, mental illness and chemical dependency. The group also maintains 38 scattered-site apartment units in four suburban cities and Seattle for individuals and families living with AIDS. Lieberman wrote a book, *Breaking New Ground: Developing Innovative AIDS Care Residences*, and established a National Technical Assistance Program to help AIDS

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housing providers and local government agencies to replicate her pioneering approach in other areas nationwide.

**Myth: What the Homeless Need Are More Shelters.**

**Truth: Solving Homelessness Requires a “Continuum of Care.”**

**John Parvensky (CO)**, President, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, is available for interviews: (303) 293-2217, [jp@coloradocoalition.org](mailto:jp@coloradocoalition.org), [www.coloradocoalition.org](http://www.coloradocoalition.org). “The best opportunity for success comes from giving homeless people a chance to live in community with middle-income people,” says Parvensky, who trained as a lawyer. His organization’s model of mixed housing reserves a third of homes for the homeless and a third for low-income people, while the rest are available at market rates, helping to cover costs. Supportive services provide a continuum of care: physical and mental health care, an in-house pharmacy, a vision clinic, intensive case management for the mentally ill, substance abuse treatment, childcare and employment assistance to find good jobs — not just day labor.

“One in three people who are homeless and living on the streets and shelters of Denver are working,” Parvensky says, noting that too often their work is day labor that does not provide benefits, stability or good wages. Despite significant progress, the challenges continue. This past December, Parvensky, with other advocates for the homeless, declared a “state of emergency” for Colorado’s homeless population. “For the first time since I began here 16 years ago, we are seeing a significant risk of even more deaths on the streets this winter,” he says.

**Sister Mary Scullion**, Executive Director; **Joan Dawson McConnon (PA)**, Associate Executive Director, Project HOME, are available for interviews: (215) 232-7272, [maryscullion@projecthome.org](mailto:maryscullion@projecthome.org), [www.projecthome.org](http://www.projecthome.org). Sister Mary Scullion and Joan Dawson McConnon stand by Project HOME’s motto: “None of us are home until all of us are home.” Scullion demonstrated her sincerity by moving into one of Philadelphia’s lowest-wealth neighborhoods herself. Since then, she has pioneered an ambitious, multi-dimensional approach to ending homelessness. Project HOME has helped more than 5,000 Philadelphian adults and children break the cycle of homelessness and poverty by providing them with a continuum of care. Depending on their needs, homeless individuals and families can move through varying degrees of support — including short-term and permanent housing and opportunities for home ownership.

Also, HOME offers social services — street outreach, case management, employment counseling, job training, after-school and adult-learning programs, a free health clinic, treatment facilities for substance abuse, art programs, financial literacy programs and housing counseling. It is working: Ninety-five percent of the men and women who live in Project HOME’s permanent, supportive housing stay off the streets. At the core of Sister Scullion’s approach is the belief that home is not only a matter of shelter, but of belonging — to a family, neighborhood, economy and democratic society. In the 2000 primary, more than 70 percent of Project HOME’s 250 residents went to the polls — compared with only 17 percent of Philadelphia’s registered voters.

**Myth: Homelessness and the Housing Crisis Are Here to Stay.**

**Truth: Community Leadership Can Reverse These Trends With a New National Will.**

More Americans than ever have achieved the dream of owning their own home: In 2002, the bipartisan, congressionally chartered Millennial Housing Commission reported that homeownership stands at an historic high of 67.8 percent.<sup>1</sup>

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Yet striking inequities stand in the way of far too many Americans.

Homeownership for blacks and Hispanics lags 27 percent behind the national average.<sup>2</sup> Working full-time no longer guarantees access to decent housing:<sup>3</sup> The average yearly income of the lowest-paid 20 percent of Americans is now \$10,500 — or 4 percent of all money earned in the nation.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult or impossible to make house payments — or even to pay rent — on such a low income. In Denver, for example, according to Parvensky, a person would need to work 118 hours a week at minimum wage to be able to afford an average one-bedroom apartment.<sup>5</sup>

By challenging the myth of hopelessness, winners of the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World award suggest effective new solutions that every community should consider replicating — and different, more secure vision of the American dream.

*And their successes also happen to be terrific stories.*

## Sources

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<sup>1</sup> Millennial Housing Commission, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Millennial Housing Commission, 2002

<sup>3</sup> *America's Working Families and the Housing Landscape*, by the National Housing Conference's Center for Housing Policy, analyzing Federal data from 1997 to 2001

<sup>4</sup> Millennial Housing Commission, 2002

<sup>5</sup> Radio interview with Parvensky

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