



# A Primer on Power, Housing Justice, and Health Equity

How Building Community Power Can Help Address  
Housing Inequities and Improve Health

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# Audience and Acknowledgements

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## Audience

This primer is intended for those working at the intersection of the health and housing sectors who aren't yet highly familiar with the ideas of community organizing and community power building. Potential audiences for this document include:

Those who plan, build, govern, finance, and organize neighborhoods and communities: community developers, local anchors, banks, private investors, philanthropies, and policy makers,

And those working in health that understand housing as a social determinant of health: including health equity leaders and advocates and researchers, hospitals investing in housing, health care providers, health insurers/payers, and health departments.

By describing key concepts such as principles of housing justice, community power, and dimensions of power, and connecting those concepts to examples from the housing justice field, we hope to increase

understanding of HOW community power building advances housing justice and fights health inequities. Depending upon their area of expertise, capacity, and tax-exempt status, different groups are able to use different strategies for engagement and power building. This document is designed to provide context for why health equity leaders, including advocates, people working in health departments, community developers, funders, and others should connect with community power building organizations and support the housing justice movement.

## About Human Impact Partners

Human Impact Partners (HIP) brings the power of public health to campaigns and movements for a just society through research, advocacy, capacity building, and field building. Our mission is to transform the field of public health to center equity and build collective power with social justice movements.

## About Right To The City

Right To The City Alliance (RTTC) emerged in 2007 with a strong and powerful vision to 1) halt the displacement of low-income people, people of color, LGBTQ communities, and youth of color, and 2) protect and expand affordable housing in tandem with a broader movement to build democratic, just, and sustainable cities for the 21st century. Since its inception, Right To The City has quickly grown to encompass 90 community-

based racial, economic, gender, and environmental justice organizations located in 43 cities and 26 states. Representing true grassroots power and leadership of the most impacted, RTTC's member organizations weave together local on-the-ground policy advocacy campaigns to build a robust and unstoppable national movement for housing, land, and development justice.

## Key Contributors

The authors would like to acknowledge all of the individuals and organizations whose work contributed directly and indirectly to the work referenced in this article, including the member leaders of the Right to the City Alliance, the community power building groups subcontracted through Lead Local, our fellow Lead Local grantees at the University of Southern California Equity Research Institute, Caring Across Generations, and Change Elemental, and the Lead Local Project team. These groups collectively helped deepen and refine power building as described in this report. Thank you to Sabiha Basrai from Design Action Collective for designing this report.

Cover photo by Kendra Sundvall

## Contact Information

Megan Gaydos  
Human Impact Partners  
megan@humanimpact.org  
www.humanimpact.org

Alia Trindle  
Right To The City Alliance  
alia@righttothecity.org  
www.righttothecity.org

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# Executive Summary

Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes... Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

**P**ower is the ability to achieve a purpose, and the work that it does depends upon the purpose. Housing and health – like all conditions in a given community – are fundamentally shaped by power. And in our current systems, power is consolidated in the hands of the few, effectively maintaining and perpetuating inequity. Marginalized people, particularly those already struggling against decades of structural racism, have little access to power to influence housing or health policies. In the context of COVID-19, this means roughly half of all renters are at risk of eviction, and this vulnerability increases the risk of illness.

This primer is intended for anyone working at the intersection of the health and housing sectors who is not yet familiar with the ideas of community organizing and community power building. Public health and health equity advocates have a valuable opportunity to partner with housing justice organizations to identify and address health inequities, but must understand *why* and *how* community

power building advances housing justice and fights health inequities. The housing justice movement offers critical frameworks and strategies to do that.

## Housing justice presents a transformative approach to the housing crisis

Housing justice means a housing system in which safe and dignified housing is a human right guaranteed to all. The Right to the City Alliance (RTTC) offers five interrelated **Just Housing Principles** as a vision of housing that supports health and well-being for all:

1. Community control
2. Affordability
3. Inclusivity
4. Permanence
5. Health and sustainability

These principles help us analyze and assess both the current US housing model, and investigate and build alternatives where the voices, needs, and leadership of individuals and communities most impacted by inequities are at the center of decision-making.

## Community power building advances housing justice and fights health inequities across 3 dimensions of power

There are many ways to use power to shape the possibilities for housing justice and health equity. The [Grassroots Policy Project \(GPP\)](#) outlines a framework of **3 distinct but interrelated dimensions of power** that we use to illustrate how power is currently concentrated and used to maintain an inequitable status quo in the housing system. Although the framework applies to power broadly, in this primer we illustrate how the dimensions manifest in the housing sector with the examples below, and how community power building organizations are working to change the status quo and advance housing justice.

- **Dimension of power:** Organizing people and resources for direct political involvement in visible decision-making arenas.
  - Status quo: Wealthy homeowners prevent affordable housing from being built in their neighborhoods, and people remain living in poorer quality housing
  - Community power: Residents take collective action to improve living conditions
  - Case study: Inquilinx Unidxs organize against unjust evictions and unhealthy housing conditions in Minneapolis

- **Dimension of power:** Building durable, long-term political infrastructure: networks of organizations that are

aligned around shared goals, who can shape political agendas.

- Status quo: Real estate lobbyists expand their power through networks of member organizations
- Community power: Local housing justice organizations come together through Right to the City to establish a network to advance a national agenda
- Case study: RTTC joins with other networks focused of climate justice, Indigenous sovereignty, and gender justice to form the It Takes Roots Alliance and to build longer-term, deeper infrastructure for their collective movements

- **Dimension of power:** Making meaning on the terrain of ideology and worldview.

- Status quo: Housing is viewed as an individual issue and a consumer good
- Community power: Building leaders who advance a vision of just and democratically controlled housing
- Case study: People's Action shapes the narrative of what's possible with the Homes Guarantee proposal.

Many of those advancing housing justice are working collectively in community power building organizations (CPBOs) to interrogate and transform how power shapes the health and equity of communities – from who makes decisions about people's lives, to what is resourced and who is included. Organizations outside of the housing sector are already allying with CPBOs to support their work, and provide a model for many other kinds of collaboration.



## Case Study: Community Power Building to Advance Housing Justice

In 2014, a group of Latinx renters and organizers in Minneapolis experiencing daily abuse by landlords and unhealthy housing conditions formed Inquilinx Unidxs (United Renters for Justice). They began hosting weekly tenant meetings, and quickly found that unjust evictions, stolen security deposits, insect infestations, and neglected living spaces were everyday realities for thousands of other families in the city. Together, members redefined the trauma they experienced and crafted solutions via demonstrations of collective power and resistance against an unfair housing system.

Quickly, the group began to see concrete victories that supported members' health and wellbeing, like quicker repairs and city inspections, and a decrease in intimidation and unjust evictions. By 2015, Inquilinx Unidxs organized a tenant association to sue their landlord, who had grossly violated the 1968 federal housing discrimination law. In 2018, members won [the largest aggregate settlement](#) in a tenant-related class action case in Minnesota history. To date, the tenants have successfully staved off evictions and are close to purchasing a group of buildings from the abusive landlord, to turn into a housing cooperative.

Inquilinx Unidxs's successful organizing against unjust evictions and unhealthy housing conditions demonstrates the strength and possibilities of community power building. This form of collectively shifting power is critical to confront our current housing and health crises. It offers a model for organizations and individuals working to advance health equity to learn from.



Photo by Kendra Sundvall



## Case Study: Health Department Partners with CPBO

There are growing examples of public health institutions internalizing a power-building framework, and partnering with CPBOs to help build collective power. For example, the Alameda County Public Health Department (ACPHD) partnered with housing justice organization Causa Justa::Just Cause (CJJC) to provide data and analysis for a research project on how foreclosures and displacement affect health in Alameda County. ACPHD also contributed health analysis as part of policy campaigns led by CJJC and others on strengthening tenant protections. In describing their work, ACPHD has used the framing of “tenant protections as preventative medicine.”

### Recommendations for allying with the housing justice movement

Everyone has a role to play in community power building for housing justice and health equity. These recommendations can apply to different actors and organizations, including those in the community development field, and those working in health who want to address housing as a social determinant of health.

**Fund community power building organizations:** Directly fund community power building organizations that have a focus on housing justice.

**Collaborate with community power building organizations on research:** Partner with community power building housing justice organizations on participatory research projects in a way that

explicitly shares power and builds member leadership.

**Bring community power building organizations into coalitions:** Advocate for the inclusion of base-building housing justice organizations in existing and emerging coalitions working on housing and community development. This may mean shifting the culture and process of coalition meetings and activities to welcome new styles of participation.

**Advance the research base to connect housing justice and health:** Contribute to research that makes connections between public health and policies that increase tenant power and community ownership of housing.

**Change the housing narrative:** Use research and communications to contribute to narrative change that advances housing justice framing.

# The housing crisis harms health and equity

**H**ousing is a basic human need yet the United States is experiencing a mounting crisis of lack of affordable, healthy and stable housing. In 2018, one of every four renters in the United States - 11 million people - were “severely cost-burdened”, spending more than 50% of their income on rent. As of July 2020, researchers are estimating that roughly half of all renters are at risk of eviction by September 2020. With rapidly escalating unemployment and a stalled economy, this looming “avalanche of evictions” is disproportionately impacting low income renters and homeowners, particularly Black, Indigenous and People

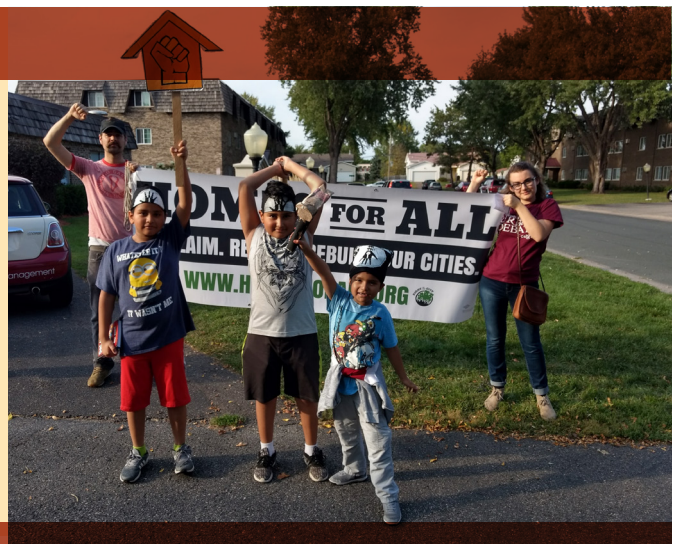
of Color (BIPOC) communities already struggling against decades-long racist housing policies and centuries of structural oppression.

In this context, the need for permanently affordable, quality, healthy and stable housing becomes even more crystal clear. The following pages aim to briefly illustrate why housing is so critical for health and well-being, why the US has such deep housing inequities, and how community power building towards housing justice can address the systemic inequities both now in the time of COVID and over the long term.

## What is Community Power?





Community power is the ability of communities most impacted by structural inequity to develop, sustain and grow an organized base of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision-makers that change systems and advance health equity. ([USC Equity Research Institute](#))

Photo by Roberto de la Riva Rojas



## Housing is a building block for health and well-being

People working in public health and in housing policy and advocacy increasingly understand that housing is a key social determinant of health for individuals, families, and communities. Safe and stable homes that are affordable and located in areas with access to key resources like good jobs, schools, transportation, and places for kids to play is a crucial building block for well-being. Over a century of public health evidence shows health is seriously affected by:

-  **Housing Instability:** People who face housing instability, such as eviction, foreclosure, or homelessness, experience a wide variety of physical and mental health conditions, including significant stress, which increases risk for diabetes, heart disease, obesity, asthma, and other chronic health problems. Housing instability is particularly harmful for kids' well-being and educational outcomes.
-  **Unaffordable Housing:** When housing costs are high compared to incomes, people are likely to cut back on other basic needs like health care, medications and food. Unaffordable housing is also a major driver of housing instability.
-  **Poor Quality Housing:** Poor housing quality has direct effects on physical health, as well as harms to mental health for both children and adults. The presence of lead can cause irreversible harm to children's cognitive development, while mold, pests, and poor indoor air quality can cause and exacerbate respiratory problems.
-  **Housing Location:** Where housing is located has been shown to predict

life expectancy by impacting access to resources like good quality schools and jobs, health care, healthy foods, and parks. Proximity to freeways, industrial sites and other environmental hazards increases risk of respiratory problems, cancer, and other chronic diseases.

Housing instability, affordability, quality and context all also contribute to chronic stress, which increases vulnerability to poor health over the lifecourse. These factors and their subsequent impacts on health are also shaped by the historical, political, and economic context of housing in the United States.

## Historical and contemporary policies have led to deep inequities in housing

Today, we know that safe, stable, and affordable homes are not available for many people in our communities. Historical and contemporary policies have led to deep racial and economic inequities in access to housing and in associated health outcomes, and to an affordable housing crisis that affects millions of people across the country.

In the United States, inequities in housing are deeply rooted in economically-driven policies and practices to consolidate land and power. Starting with European colonization and policies such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the US government advanced a centuries-long genocidal program that seized roughly 1.5 billion acres of land from their original habitants through displacement or elimination. Federal-Indian trust relationships resulted in hundreds of treaties where the US government received



Indian lands in exchange for setting aside reservation lands for those tribes and committing to respect the sovereignty of tribes and to protect the safety and well-being of the tribes. In numerous cases, Native Americans were dispossessed of their land and never received the full promised payments nor commitments of the US government. Today, in general, Native Americans' health ranks among the worst in the United States and some Native Americans face a tension between selling their lands to address wealth inequities and keeping their lands for cultural preservation.

While Native Americans faced genocide and displacement from their lands to expand economic growth for White people, Black people were brought to America as enslaved people to produce economic value by working on land that they weren't permitted to own. Decades of Jim Crow segregation and racial violence undermined Black Americans' attempts to build economic power through land ownership. Immigrant communities' access to land and housing often depended on different groups' place in a racial hierarchy that shifted as "whiteness" was redefined to include Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, and other Europeans. Asian immigrants faced a variety of forms of racist exclusion throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, including anti-immigrant violence that confined Chinese immigrants to dilapidated Chinatowns and "alien land laws" adopted by Western states that prevented Chinese and Japanese immigrants from owning land.

In the 1940s and 1950s federal agencies, banks, homeowners, and community developers implemented practices such as

redlining and racially restrictive covenants across the United States, which prevented Black and Latinx people from purchasing homes. This was at the same time as the federal government's efforts to subsidize homeownership for White people, at an unprecedented scale, through policies like federally insured mortgages and the G.I. Bill.

Although explicit racial discrimination in housing was made illegal by the Fair Housing Act of 1968, segregation is maintained through "race neutral" policies like exclusionary zoning rules which make it impossible to construct apartments or low-cost housing in many wealthy neighborhoods.

Together these policies have severely hampered the ability of people of color, particularly Black people and Latinx populations, to build wealth through homeownership, and restricted households of color to neighborhoods with dangerous and deteriorating housing stock. This history contributes to the racial housing inequities that we see today:

White households on average have almost 10 times the wealth of Black households: the median net worth of a White family is \$171,000, compared to \$17,500 for a Black family.

Black people, and especially Black women, are evicted at significantly higher rates than White people. Research in Milwaukee found that while women living in Black neighborhoods made up less than 10% of the city's population, they accounted for 30% of evictions.

Alaska Native and American Indian people living on remaining tribal lands have some of the poorest quality housing, including lacking basic necessities like electricity and running water. HUD research has found that nearly half the people living in tribal areas would be homeless if they didn't double-up with friends or family.

Latino families are 14 times more likely to have zero or negative wealth (32.8%) than they are to reach the millionaire threshold (2.3%), compared to White families who are equally likely to have zero or negative wealth (15%) as they are to be a millionaire (15%).

## **Our housing system perpetuates wealth inequities and leaves renters behind**

In general, homeownership is only available to those who have the savings for a down payment and sufficient income for mortgage payments and other regular expenses, and/or those who received their home from previous generations. Because our system of housing treats a home both as a place to live and a financial investment, people who own land and homes are able to generate, maintain and expand their wealth significantly more than those who rent. Their children in turn are more likely to buy homes, and first-time homebuyers are increasingly likely to get financial help from their families. In 2018, the typical net worth of homeowners was \$254,000 while the typical renter's household wealth was \$5,000. Said another way, the typical homeowner's household net worth in 2018 was 51 times greater than that of the typical renter, up from 35 times greater in 2010.

Today's housing crisis continues to hit low-income people the hardest, but has also grown to affect middle-income people:

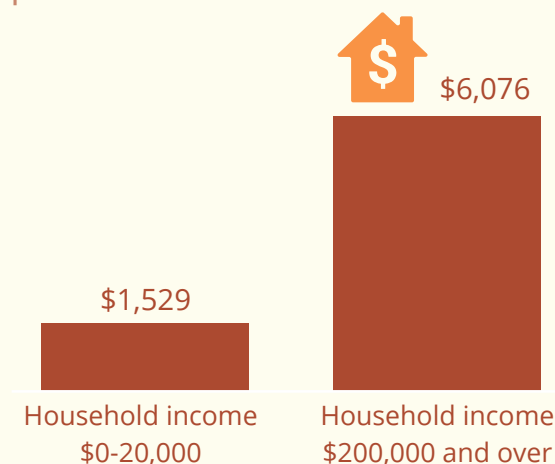
- The number of cost-burdened renters (who pay over 30% of their income towards their rent) is near a record high, and 10.9 million renters in the US are extremely cost burdened, meaning they pay *over half* their incomes towards their housing costs.
- The increasing share of middle-income households who are cost burdened is a big contributor to these record high numbers. For example, the share of renter households making between \$30,000 and \$45,000 who are cost burdened grew from 50% to 56% from 2011 to 2018.
- Pre-COVID, each year, 1 in 17 renter households experienced the stressful threat of eviction through eviction filings and 1 in 40 renter households, or nearly 1 million renters, are evicted each year. By contrast, rates of foreclosure on homeowners were much lower after peaking in 2010.

Although low-income renters are the most likely to pay huge portions of their income towards rent, and to experience housing instability, federal subsidies for housing disproportionately target wealthier homeowners through benefits like mortgage interest and property tax deductions. These tax deductions are regressive, providing the greatest share of benefits to the wealthiest households who own expensive homes, and dwarfing spending on programs benefiting renters, such as housing vouchers or the construction of affordable rental housing. On average, a household making \$200,000 or more annually receives four times

more housing benefits from the federal government than a household earning less than \$20,000.<sup>1</sup> The current approach to housing policy does little to address the inequities established in the housing system.

### High-Income Households Get Four Times More Housing Benefits Than Low-Income Households

Annual federal housing spending per household



Note: Data are for 2015. Data available for mortgage interest and property tax deductions and housing Choice Voucher, Section 8 Project-Based, Public Housing, Housing for the Elderly (Section 202), and Housing for People with Disabilities (Section 811) programs. These represent about three-fourths of homeowner and rental spending.

Sources: CBPP analysis of HUD program data, Census data on number of households in each income group, Joint Committee on Taxation tax expenditure estimates, and the Office of Management and Budget public budget data base.

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES | CBPP.ORG

## Health and housing advocates need to address the distribution of power as a root cause of the housing crisis

Advocates, policymakers, and major institutions are increasingly recognizing and acting on the connections between health, housing, and equity. For example, affordable housing developers like [Enterprise Community Development](#) have expanded partnerships with the health sector. Hospitals like [Nationwide Children's in Columbus, Ohio](#) have begun to invest directly in [rehabilitating and constructing affordable housing](#) in adjacent neighborhoods.

Multi-sector collaborations such as the Strong, Prosperous, And Resilient Communities Challenge ([SPARCC](#)) are bringing together health funders and community development organizations to invest in climate-resilient community development and ensure that these investments advance racial equity and health while preventing displacement. SPARCC prioritizes the [inclusion of low income residents and residents of color in public engagement processes](#), and uses [racial equity as its guiding principle](#).

These efforts to connect health and housing, to influence systems of community investment, and to bring residents into decision-making processes are great progress. But we also need to look deeper to the **root cause of the housing crisis that leads to health inequities: the inequitable distribution of power.**





## Our definitions of health equity acknowledge the role of power

When talking about health equity, we already include a lack of power as one driver of poor health and health inequities. To truly create health equity we will need to profoundly shift who has power in our society.

A characteristic common to groups that experience health inequities—such as poor or marginalized persons, racial and ethnic minorities, and women—is **lack of political, social or economic power**. **Thus, to be effective and sustainable, interventions that aim to redress inequities must typically go beyond remedying a particular health inequality and also help empower the group in question through systemic changes**, such as law reform or changes in economic or social relationships.

— [World Health Organization](#)

Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. **This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness** and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.

— [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#)

# Housing justice presents an alternative to the housing crisis

**H**ousing justice is the process and outcome of establishing a housing system in which housing is a human right — not a commodity to maximize profit — and therefore everyone has access to affordable and dignified housing.

The Right to the City Alliance (RTTC) is a national alliance of racial, economic and environmental justice organizations (see [acknowledgements](#) for more information) many of who are working to address gentrification, displacement and urban justice.

In 2014, RTTC developed [five interrelated principles](#) to guide their vision for housing justice. The five *Just Housing Principles* are:

- **community control**
- **affordability**
- **inclusivity**
- **permanence**
- **health and sustainability**

These principles present a vision of housing that supports health and well-being for all. Building a housing system based on these principles would mark a profound shift away from the deeply inequitable system that's now in place.

RTTC uses the Just Housing Principles to analyze and assess both the current US housing model and alternative models. They can help show which models successfully provide affordable and dignified homes for all, and what makes them work well or fail.

The table below illustrates these principles with reflection questions that dig into whether they are being addressed, and concrete examples of where and how the principles are being implemented, both in the United States and internationally. The questions and examples are adapted from RTTC's 2018 [Communities Over Commodities](#) report, which identifies housing models that meet all five of the principles. Here we highlight specific examples of how the individual principles are met, and more extensive descriptions are available in the full report.

# Principles to Advance Housing Justice

Developed by the Right to the City Alliance

Principle	Reflection questions	Examples of decomodified housing that upholds these principles
<b>Community Control</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are housing and land controlled through democratic structures and processes by those who live there, while still upholding the other four principles?</li><li>• Is there ongoing education and training that supports residents in developing their skills, capacities, and leadership?</li></ul>	<p>The <a href="#">Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative</a> (DSNI) is a <a href="#">Community Land Trust</a> (CLT) in Boston. CLTs are community controlled nonprofit organizations that acquire, own, and manage land and housing on behalf and to the benefit of a specific community.</p> <p>DSNI provides 225 affordable homes for mostly low-income residents of color. Like most CLTs, DSNI requires substantial resident representation on its democratically elected <a href="#">Board of Directors</a>. They invest in resident leadership development and have a specific focus on cultivating <a href="#">youth leaders</a>.</p>
<b>Affordability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• After paying housing costs including utilities, do people have enough to cover all other basic needs so that they can thrive?</li><li>• Is affordability determined fairly by looking at one's neighborhood and not an entire metropolitan area?</li></ul>	<p>The <a href="#">Amalgamated Housing Cooperative</a> in the Bronx is a <a href="#">Limited Equity Cooperative</a> (LEC).</p> <p>In an LEC, member-residents jointly own their building through the purchase of shares in a cooperative corporation, securing long-term rights to occupancy.</p> <p>Amalgamated, founded by garment workers in 1927, is the oldest LEC in the US and <a href="#">houses nearly 1,500 families</a>. Like other LECs, Amalgamated preserves affordability for low- and moderate-income households by restricting resale values, and setting income limits for new members.</p>
<b>Inclusivity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is housing accessible to historically marginalized populations including people of color, immigrants, formerly incarcerated people, gender non-conforming individuals, and LGBTQ persons?</li><li>• Are they actively included in decision-making related to the housing and community?</li><li>• Do both the location and design foster residents' inclusion?</li></ul>	<p>The <a href="#">Martin Luther King Latino Cooperative</a> is an LEC in Washington DC. It was established by a <a href="#">group of tenants</a> from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala who organized to purchase their building in a gentrifying neighborhood that was rapidly becoming unaffordable for working class immigrants.</p>



Principle	Reflection questions	Examples of decomodified housing that upholds these principles
<b>Permanence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are people’s homes protected from market forces causing displacement?</li> <li>• Are homes protected from changes in government policy that jeopardize their housing security over the long term?</li> </ul>	Community Land Trusts like DSNI ensure affordability for current residents and in perpetuity. Individual residents generally receive <u>99 year leases</u> , while the land itself is permanently held by a nonprofit trust that limits resale values when residents turnover.
<b>Health and Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does housing foster healthy, sustainable communities?</li> <li>• Does it maximize the well-being of residents?</li> <li>• Does it incorporate ecological design and construction, climate resiliency, clean and renewable energy, and safe, affordable water systems?</li> </ul>	Federación Uruguaya de Cooperativas de Vivienda por Ayuda Mutua (FUCVAM) is a federation of mutual aid housing cooperatives in Uruguay. In mutual aid cooperatives, residents collectively own and manage land and also directly participate in the construction of their own housing, with coops providing training as necessary. Member-owners ensure that housing is well-maintained, and coops within FUCVAM have prioritized building with <u>local, natural materials, and using renewable energy sources</u> .

## Getting to housing justice requires shifting power

We can’t bring these principles into practice without changing the distribution of power in our communities and country. Several of the principles, such as *community control* and *inclusivity*, speak explicitly to the idea of power: they are about ensuring that

residents are able to play a role in making decisions about the place that they live, and affirmatively including people who have been historically marginalized. But putting these principles into practice on a large scale will also involve building power to change the housing status quo.

# Understanding dimensions of community power helps deepen housing justice and health equity analysis

All conditions in any given community — including health, healthcare, and housing, as well as other factors like education, jobs, childcare, and transportation — are fundamentally shaped by power. But power is a complex concept, and breaking it down can help show both who currently has power over our housing system, and how the housing justice movement seeks to build community power to change that system.

## Community power is explicitly connected to equity

Power in general is not inherently good or bad, it can be used to further entrench inequities or to create more equitable communities. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that “Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes...Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.”

When we refer to *community power* we mean power at its best: the ability of communities most impacted by structural inequity to develop, sustain and grow an organized base of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision-makers that change systems and advance health equity (USC Equity Research Institute).

*Community power building* is the set of strategies that these communities use to act. It is particularly critical for underserved, underrepresented, and historically marginalized communities who have been excluded from decision-making on the policies and practices that impact their health and the health of their communities (USC Equity Research Institute).

## The 3 dimensions of power

There are many ways to use power to shape the possibilities for housing justice and health equity. Breaking these down helps illuminate how power is currently used to maintain the status quo in housing, and how community power building organizations are working to change it.

The [Grassroots Policy Project](#) (GPP) outlines 3 distinct but interrelated dimensions of power:<sup>2</sup>

1. Organizing people and resources for direct political involvement in visible decision-making arenas.
2. Building durable, long-term political infrastructure: networks of organizations that are aligned around shared goals, who can shape political agendas.
3. Making meaning on the terrain of ideology and worldview.

These expressions of power are not *issue-based*, but cut across all facets of life. Power is the medium through which all community conditions are determined and shaped. Thus, challenging the inequitable distributions of power challenges the root of all inequality in society.

## Currently, marginalized people have little access to power to influence housing

A group of people's power is a function and reflection of their structural position in society and their relationship to other social groups. Power is not evenly distributed across our society, and this differential power shapes institutions of medical

science, major political parties, schools and universities, the legal system, the media, and others which shape people's conscious and unconscious understandings of how the world works.

Communities that are politically, socially, culturally, and economically marginalized from the centers of power — including working-class communities, people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, women, and LGBTQ people — have less access to power across all 3 dimensions:

1. *Less political access and involvement in visible decision-making arenas* — such as legislatures, courts, corporate boards, Chambers of Commerce, the governing bodies of national political parties, and housing agencies like public housing authorities or the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
2. *Less infrastructure* — in the form of well-resourced networks of coordinated and overlapping organizations working together to advance a broad vision of housing justice that goes beyond the short-term goals of individual organizations
3. *Less control over prevailing worldviews* — the predominant model of small government, individual responsibility, and self-sufficiency have largely determined the solutions to the housing crisis and the potential to advance radical solutions to the housing needs of marginalized communities

## Social change requires transformative community power building

Eliminating the barriers that stand in the way of everyone living in an affordable, safe, and stable home requires substantial social change: transforming this imbalance of power along all these dimensions.

There are a wide variety of approaches to social change that ultimately lead to different outcomes. The difference in these approaches comes down to a set of related questions:

- What is your theory of power? <sup>3</sup>
- Based on your theory of power, what are the root causes of the problem?
- Based on your understanding of the root causes, who is best positioned to solve the problem?

“Transformative organizing” (or transformative community power building in the terms we use in this document) contends that power is currently centralized in the hands of a few, and that — in order to meet our human needs as a society — power must be democratized. Organizing places the agency for success with a continually

expanding base of ordinary people who help make the power analysis, design the strategy, and achieve the outcome. They are essential and they know it.

In the transformative organizing approach, specific unjust policies are the immediate motivation, but the primary goal is to transfer power from the elite to the majority. Individual campaigns matter in themselves, but they are primarily a mechanism for bringing new people into the change process and keeping them involved. When people understand the strategy because they helped make it, they will be invested for the long haul, sustained and propelled to achieve more meaningful wins.

This approach to change understands the root causes of the housing crisis being derived from deeply ingrained power relations within our society including racism, sexism, and an economy that creates haves and have-nots. Therefore, it is essential that those involved grow their capacity to hold the immediate urgency of the moment in tandem with their long-term vision and strategy that will ultimately bring about a just housing system.



## Community power building organizations

The people doing transformative organizing often come together in *community power building organizations*. These are organizations that may be identified by geography (local, state, regional, national), demography (e.g. youth, workers, multi-racial) or issue(s) (e.g. workers rights, environmental justice, multi-issue) who conduct a range of activities including *base building*. Other terms sometimes used to describe these groups include but are not limited to: grassroots organizing groups, social movement groups, movement-building organizations, community-based organizations, community organizing groups, base building groups. ([USC Equity Research Institute](#))

Base building — also called grassroots organizing — is focused on bringing people together who are directly affected by the conditions they are working to change, building their leadership skills, and building their power to hold decision makers accountable, or become the decision makers themselves. This is different from social change efforts which rely on professionalized advocates working on “on behalf” of people who are directly affected.<sup>4</sup> An organized base of community members are in relationship and invest in each other’s leadership, share a common identity shaped by similar experiences and an understanding of the root causes of their conditions, and use their collective analysis to create solutions and strategize to achieve them. This base may join the membership of an organization. ([USC Equity Research Institute](#))

Organizers build their base through a variety of tactics, including individual conversations with potential members, door-to-door outreach, political education, leadership training and ensuring new and long-time members have meaningful roles. With a substantial and well-developed base, community power building organizations can shift power to people who individually have little financial or political power.

Photo by Mike Dennis



## The power-building ecosystem includes a wide variety of organizations

The USC Equity Research Institute (ERI) has visualized the power-building ecosystem, with organizing and base-building at its center, and complementary organizations that support and uplift their work as a power flower illustrated in Figure 1 below.

People and organizations working at the intersection of housing and health, and in the housing and community development fields, can play many of these roles. Funders, including private foundations and governmental public health, can fund base-building organizations directly.

Governmental and nonprofit organizations, as well as health care providers like clinics and hospitals, can join coalitions, shape policy, and conduct research that makes the case for policy change, and much more.

Even though many players are involved in this ecosystem, community power building (aka organizing and base-building) is always central. Specifically, the voices, needs, and leadership of those individuals and communities most impacted by inequities are at the center of decision-making. The supportive “petals” are conducting research, shaping the narrative and policy, and providing resources to help advance the goals and capacity of the base/those whose power is being built.



Figure 1: Types of organizations within the power-building ecosystem. Developed by USC ERI.

# Dimensions of Power in Action: Examples and Housing Justice Case Studies

The following sections illustrate how power is currently concentrated and used to maintain the status quo in the housing system and how community power building organizations are working to advance housing justice and equity. We return to the [3 dimensions of power](#) framework to show the different ways that organizations use power.

## 1: Organizing people and resources for direct political involvement decision-making



### **Status Quo: Wealthy homeowners prevent affordable housing in their neighborhoods**

Most cities' and towns' processes for building new housing privilege the participation and opinions of wealthy homeowners, who often use planning meetings or public comment periods to oppose new development that is affordable or simply contains smaller homes or apartments. Because [zoning rules in wealthy neighborhoods](#) with lots of investment in resources like public schools tend to allow only large houses on large

lots, new affordable housing often requires some form of exemption from these rules. (Which were often [created](#) to exclude low-income people and people of color from wealthy areas.) Proposed projects then have to go through multiple planning committees before being approved. In the [words](#) of one affordable housing developer, the process "is structured to give the people who are in possession of the existing status quo power over other people."

Zoning and planning [meetings](#) are often held during the day at times that are challenging for working people to attend, and locations may be hard to reach on public transit. Meeting agendas and timing can vary hugely, making it difficult to predict when public comment will happen. One result is that people who participate in local planning decisions are [disproportionately](#) older white male homeowners, who tend to be arguing against new housing rather than in favor of it. People who speak out against new affordable housing often use coded language about "[neighborhood character](#)" to protest housing that would be accessible to lower-



income people. The result is situations like a recent case in [Palo Alto, CA](#), where residents stopped the construction of a housing development that would have included 60 apartments for moderate-income seniors. Instead, the site ended up with 16 single-family homes for sale, each about 4,000 square feet in size and with asking prices starting at \$5 million.



### **Community power: Residents take collective action to improve living conditions**

Community power building housing justice organizations work with people experiencing housing injustices, including low income and senior tenants, tenants with disabilities or experiencing language barriers, and homeowners at risk of mortgage foreclosures. In a housing justice organization, tenants learn to recruit their neighbors, develop campaign strategy, and take collective action together. Collective action takes many forms including building tenant unions, gathering petition signatures

to advocate for better conditions, going on a rent strike, accompanying each other to rent court, taking direct action to stop evictions, among many other ways tenants build and wield their power.

Across the United States, there are hundreds of community power building organizations working to advance housing justice, many of whom are connected to national alliances like the [Right to the City Alliance](#), [Homes for All](#), the [Center for Popular Democracy](#), and [Faith in Action](#), but all of whom are locally rooted and connected to their membership base.



### **Case Study: Inquilinxs Unidxs organize against unjust evictions and unhealthy housing conditions in Minneapolis**

[Inquilinxs Unidxs](#) (United Renters for Justice) was started in 2014 by a group of 20 Latinx renters and organizers in the Lyndale Neighborhood of Minneapolis who, after sharing the daily abuses they were



Photo by Kendra Sundvall



experiencing at the hands of landlords and management companies, decided to start hosting weekly tenant meetings. They found that unjust evictions, stolen security deposits, insect infestations, and neglected living spaces were everyday realities for these tenants and for thousands of other families in the city as well. Through these meetings, they were able to tell and retell their stories, redefining the trauma they experienced alone against an unfair housing system into a shared narrative of resilience and resistance. The tenants were able to leave behind their fear, and gain strength from their common experience. They started to craft solutions to their common problems and through demonstrations of collective power (such as visiting the management office en-masse) the tenants executed their solutions.

Immediately, tenants and organizers began to see concrete victories: repairs were completed, the intimidation ended, city inspections were carried out more promptly, communal spaces in their buildings were opened to them, unjust evictions were stopped, and their fear of the landlord disappeared. A year later in 2015, the group had organized a tenant association of 20 renters to sue their landlord, who had grossly violated the 1968 federal housing discrimination law by giving White people preferential treatment over Latinxs. They were also battling the landlord over the presence of bedbugs, rats, and a lack of heat.

In 2018, Inquilinx Unidxs members won the largest aggregate settlement in a tenant related class action case in Minnesota history. The landlord was forced to pay out \$18.5 million to 4,361 tenants and former

tenants, and several Inquilinx Unidxs members invested all or part of their checks back into their organization.

In 2018, the city revoked the landlord's rental licenses, barring him from renting out any more buildings in Minneapolis. Since then, he has had to sell almost all of his buildings. In the last five buildings he owns, he is trying to evict everyone before selling them. Inquilinx Unidxs members — several of whom were involved in the class action lawsuit — live in those five buildings and are now organizing to buy the building from him and turn them into a housing cooperative. They have gone on a rent strike, petitioned the City Council to stop the eviction, and organized their neighbors to stand with them in this last pitched battle with their landlord. To date, the tenants have successfully staved off evictions and get closer every day to a purchase agreement for the five buildings.

## 2: Building durable networks of organizations that are aligned around shared goals and can shape political agendas



**Status quo: Real estate lobbyists expand their power through networks of member organizations**

The real estate industry has developed extensive capacity to affect political decision-making, for example through the National Association of Realtors (NAR), which is over 100 years old and consistently ranks as one of the biggest spenders on lobbying in the US, after the Chamber of Commerce. NAR works through an intentionally developed network of member organizations and affiliates, including a Political Action

Committee that promotes the election of “pro-realtor” political candidates.

NAR has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on aggressive lobbying to advance a policy agenda focused on maximization of profits for the real estate industry, such as federal deregulation of the financial services industry to impact mortgage lending practices. But their network consists of organizations beyond realtor groups — private equity firms like Blackstone, now the biggest global real estate management firm, join realtors in financing opposition to community-driven solutions like rent control.

At the federal, state and local levels, NAR and others in the real estate industry, have used their networks to:

- Cut funding for housing inspections, which allows landlords to make large profits from substandard housing conditions.
- Limit funding for construction and maintenance of affordable housing, allowing the housing market to be determined by business demands.
- Limit legal protections and funding for tenants who advocate for their right to decent housing, including funding service-based tenant-aid programs but not power-building programs that help tenants fight back against abuse.
- Support local land use planning that favors maximization of land value for developers and real estate interests, over community health and well-being.

NAR influence allows them to assert that they speak for the majority of Americans. They have claimed that they are a voice for their 1.3 million members and also

“America’s 78 million homeowners, as well as the tens of millions more Americans who aspire to own their home one day.”



### **Community power: Local housing justice organizations come together through Right to the City to advance a national agenda**

Grassroots base-building groups are increasingly developing national and international networks of allied organizations that are working together to advance shared goals. For example, the Right to the City (RTTC) Alliance was formed in 2007 as a unified response to gentrification and a call to halt the displacement of low-income people, people of color, marginalized LGBTQ communities, and youths of color from their historic urban neighborhoods. Initially formed as a national alliance of racial, economic, and environmental justice organizations, RTTC developed shared principles, a common frame, and theory of change to build a national movement for racial justice, urban justice, human rights, and democracy.

RTTC’s first national campaign is Homes for All, which “aims to protect, defend, and expand housing that is truly affordable and dignified for low-income and very low-income communities by engaging those most directly impacted by this crisis through local and national organizing, winning strong local policies that protect renters and homeowners, and shifting the national debate on housing.”

RTTC and HFA are building durable networks to advance shared political agendas by:

- Identifying shared principles and values that all member organizations agree to uphold
- Developing a tri-body leadership structure that have distinct but interdependent roles in building movement infrastructure and coordinating strategy, while being led by those most impacted by housing inequities
- Supporting capacity building, resource sharing, and strategy to advance “translocal” campaigns across local organizations

Other recent examples of housing-related justice movements that are developing political infrastructure include [The Alliance for Housing Justice](#), [People’s Action Institute](#), and [It Takes Roots](#). Some community power building networks have adopted organizational structures that allow them to engage more directly in legislative lobbying and elections. The [People’s Action Institute](#) for example, is a 501(c)(3) organization made up of a [network](#) of local non-profit organizations across the country. Their sister network, [People’s Action](#), is a 501(c)(4), with [members](#) that also have 501(c)(4) status, which means that they can endorse political candidates and engage in lobbying as a primary activity, unlike 501(c)(3)s.

Through this work, RTTC and others have realized that successful movements require support from auxiliary actors that can provide expertise in service of broader goals. When legal, academic, and other values-aligned organizations work together to advance the goals and demands of working class leadership, cross-class and multi-racial solidarity becomes possible. Grassroots base-building in disinvested neighborhoods rarely reaches policy experts,

impact litigators, researchers, journalists, and philanthropists, many of whom are organized in their own affinity groups and professional organizations. Sustained and trusting relationships between organizations focused on building mass power and movement support organizations can elevate grassroots struggle from the neighborhood to the national level.

In a grassroots housing justice organization, tenants amplify their power by coming together with other grassroots organizations through larger coalitions, alliances, and networks. Together, these formations share resources, strategies, and stories that cooperatively build long-term infrastructure to shape political agendas.



**Case Study: RTTC joins with networks focused of climate justice, Indigenous sovereignty, and gender justice to form the It Takes Roots alliance**

Alma Blackwell is a member leader turned staff organizer of [Causa Justa :: Just Cause](#) (CJJC) in Oakland, CA. Alma is a great example of how local organizers can help build regional, national and international networks to advance similar goals, like housing justice.

Ten years ago, an organizer knocked on Alma’s door with a survey and she’s been organizing with the organization ever since. As a CJJC volunteer leader, Alma was invited to represent CJJC at the Right to the City Alliance meetings, a broader national alliance of 85+ grassroots housing justice organizations. Over time, Alma joined CJJC as staff and through this position began to co-anchor the Homes for All campaign Renters’





Photo by Lisa Thompson

Rights track, helping build a renter nation to win affordable, dignified and permanent homes for all people.

As part of Right To The City leadership, Alma and others from RTTC joined a broader network of organizations called It Takes Roots (ITR). ITR is a multiracial, multicultural, multigenerational alliance of alliances representing over 200 organizations and affiliates in over 50 states, provinces, territories and Native lands in the U.S. and Canada; and is led by women, gender nonconforming people, people of color, and Indigenous Peoples.

It is an outcome of years of organizing and relationship building across the membership of Climate Justice Alliance, Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, Indigenous Environmental Network and Right To The City Alliance, with support from The Ruckus Society and Center for Story-based Strategy.

The four alliances are led by communities on the frontlines of racial, gender, housing and climate justice—communities targeted by discriminatory and harmful policies that jeopardize hard-fought victories for human rights, Native rights, worker rights, tenant rights, environmental justice, and public health. It Takes Roots first formed during organizing for the 2014 People's Climate March and continued their partnership through multiple international climate mobilizations. They began working together more closely in 2016 to implement broader strategies and maintain organizing campaigns that resist harmful federal policies in the US. Members are united in the belief that communities with roots at the frontlines of the economic and ecological crises are best positioned to lead solutions in every sector.

It Takes Roots develops cross-sector movement alignment and collective strategy



to ensure that frontline communities are seen as strategic leaders, not just victims. They aim to strengthen a democratic movement that is accountable to our bases and to demand a Just Transition toward good jobs, clean energy, and healthy, safe, just, and resilient communities. ITR organizes intersectoral collaboration and cohesion around common principles, analysis, framework, and cross-member / cross-sector engagement. They are building a new base of political, economic, and cultural power for systemic change and a Just Transition.

### 3: Making meaning on the terrain of ideology and worldview

The third dimension of power is about the ability “to shape people’s conscious and unconscious understandings of the world, of what is politically possible, and of their own place in the world.” While this aspect of power may seem more abstract and disconnected from the more common work of winning campaigns and building networks, ultimately changing the “common sense” narrative about housing and its purpose in society is crucial to creating a just housing system.



#### **Status quo: Housing is an individual issue and a consumer good**

Research from the [FrameWorks Institute](#) has found that the dominant public American narrative remains rooted in the idea that housing is a private, consumer good, and that government involvement in housing is unlikely to improve things. Key elements of

this narrative and framing include beliefs that:

- Racial and economic segregation is a choice resulting from individual decisions making rather than structural inequalities
- Issues surrounding affordable housing and housing stability are impossible to resolve as prices are solely dependent on market forces
- The purpose of housing is to fulfill basic needs, rather than provide a healthy environment that provides the opportunity to live a high-quality life

The public tends to view “healthy housing” as a consumer good, governed by the laws of supply and demand, rather than a right that provides a platform for well-being. Media and housing advocacy materials often do little to counter these dominant narratives, leading to an underappreciation of how structural mechanisms drive housing costs and only make good housing available to some. When these materials don’t explicitly provide and explain counter-narratives, the public continues to fill in the gaps with the deeply ingrained beliefs they already have. The pervasive status quo idea is that housing is both a commodity and an *individual* issue — and this fuels the idea that some people deserve help obtaining and/or maintaining housing, while others are undeserving of support.

The dominant housing narrative in the United States also continues to elevate individual homeownership as the primary housing goal, and to promote the idea that homeownership is a *financial investment* (i.e., that home values can and should increase), even though rising property values

are fundamentally at odds with housing affordability. The primacy of individual homeownership is explicitly promoted by powerful actors like the National Association of Realtors, who in recent congressional testimony stated:

Policymakers should not dismiss or underestimate Americans' passion for homeownership, notwithstanding the most recent economic crisis. Calling homeownership the "American Dream" is not a mere slogan, but rather a bedrock value. Owning a piece of property has been central to American values since Plymouth and Jamestown. Homes are the foundation of our culture...The Nation's long-standing commitment to homeownership as a foundation of our society is not misplaced. Now, more than ever, homeownership does and should remain in the forefront of our cultural value system.

This dimension of power shapes what policies are enacted and, to some extent, what policies are even possible to debate. In housing, the discussion is ubiquitously framed in language that helps maintain the status quo and continues to centralize power in the hands of those who are already powerful.



### **Community power: Building leaders who advance a vision of just and democratically controlled housing**

Building a new housing system requires creating new housing and land models that are controlled through democratic structures and processes by those who live there,

as outlined in the Just Housing Principles. Because the dominant narrative conditions people to accept an unstable and isolating housing system as normal, shifting the third dimension of power requires ongoing education and leadership development that supports residents in understanding the principles and alternative housing models that advance them.

Establishing a dominant housing narrative based on community stewardship and control rather than the speculative market also means engaging with media and other major institutions like political, educational, and religious institutions that "make meaning." Building community power means supporting the leadership of large groups of people who directly experience the effects of housing injustice so they have access to and can influence these institutions.



### **Case Study: People's Action shapes the narrative of what's possible with the Homes Guarantee proposal**

People's Action Institute is a national network of urban and rural grassroots base-building organizations. Their long-term agenda focuses on public control of the economy, real participatory democracy, racial and gender justice, and global sustainability. Housing justice is one of People's Action's main campaign areas, and in September 2019 they released a National Homes Guarantee proposal, calling for federal investments that ensure everyone in the United States is affordably housed. The Homes Guarantee is a major shift away from the current patchwork and incrementalist approach to affordable housing policy in



Photo by Helen Matthews

the US, and is based on the premise that “Everyone living in the United States should have safe, accessible, sustainable, and permanently affordable housing.”

The policy agenda in the Homes Guarantee includes:

- Building 12 million units of permanently affordable social housing for people paying over half their income towards rent or experiencing homelessness
- Reinvesting in existing public housing so that all homes are safe and healthy
- Protecting tenants with a National Tenant Bill of Rights including rent control and just cause eviction policies, and protecting “bank tenants” (homeowners indebted to predatory lending institutions) by regulating mortgages and financial institutions

- Paying reparations to Black, Indigenous and other People of Color who have been victims of racist land and housing policies
- Ending land and real estate speculation through tax policies that de-incentivize speculation

This policy agenda was developed by grassroots leaders in member organizations of People’s Action Institute. After creating the initial Homes Guarantee framework, People’s Action Institute engaged in base building through popular education, and connected with people with additional policy expertise and with legislators who would champion their ideas. Member organizations reviewed the draft platform and revised to ensure that it was responsive to the needs of communities that are directly affected by unjust housing policies.

The Homes Guarantee clearly counters the dominant consumerist, individualist, and market-based housing narrative. People's Action elevated this narrative through media coverage of the platform, including reporting that highlights the role of grassroots leadership in creating and advocating for the platform. They also created a political candidate pledge, through which candidates not only endorse the platform, but pledge not to accept campaign donations from

large landlords and real estate developers. People's Action's engagement with legislators who are aligned with the Homes Guarantee platform has continued to spread this narrative through proposed legislation like the Green New Deal for Public Housing Act. And in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, People's Action has used the platform as a basis for demands that ensure lower income people do not lose their housing.



# Everyone has a role to play in advancing housing justice

**A**s illustrated in [Figure 1](#) above, the broader “power-building ecosystem” needs other organizations and individuals that ally with community power building groups and provide a range of skills and expertise. A wide range of skills and capacities are needed and have a role to play, but with an explicit focus of having community power building groups be at the center of decision-making in that ecosystem.

## Public health and community development stakeholders ally with housing justice

Organizations outside of the housing sector are already allying with base-building housing justice organizations to support their work, and can provide a model for many other kinds of collaboration. For example, some public health organizations are allying with housing organizers because health is so impacted by housing conditions. And some community development organizations and developers are allying with housing organizers because they deepen and enrich community engagement and strategy for equitable community development. Below are some concrete examples of this work and how it fits into the power-building ecosystem illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

### Alameda County Public Health Department partners with Causa Justa::Just Cause

The Alameda County Public Health Department (ACPHD) partnered with the housing justice organization Causa Justa::Just Cause (CJJC) to provide data and analysis for a research project on how foreclosures and displacement affect health in Alameda County. ACPHD also contributed health analysis as part of policy campaigns led by CJJC and others on strengthening tenant protections. In describing their work, ACPHD has used the framing of “tenant protections as preventative medicine.”

- Supporting roles: Research, Communication and Narrative Change, Alliances and Coalitions, Advocacy and Policy

### Human Impact Partners collaborates with Chainbreaker Collective in Santa Fe

Human Impact Partners worked with Chainbreaker Collective, a membership-based economic and environmental justice organization, to conduct research on equitable development in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The New Mexico Health Equity Partnership funded Human Impact

Partners as a project lead, and Chainbreaker Collective received a sub-grant to support their work and their participation in the research. Together they produced a [report](#) analyzing neighborhood-level risk of gentrification and displacement, and the distribution of key resources like transportation infrastructure and affordable housing. Chainbreaker Collective used this research to advocate for racially equitable investment of city resources, and increased protections against displacement for Santa Fe residents.

- Supporting roles: Funding, Research

### **Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment funds housing justice collaborations**

The Colorado Department of Public Health's [Health Disparities Grant Program](#) developed a [strategic framework](#) for their 2020-2021 funding cycle that focused explicitly on addressing health equity through systems and policy change related to housing and land use, and reducing displacement, gentrification, and segregation. They provided funding to 4 grantees, all of which include elements of community organizing in their projects. For example, the [Eagle County Public Health Department](#) is focused on equitable housing policy in their rural county, specifically for low-income Latinx residents of mobile home parks. Part of their funding is being subcontracted to [9to5 Colorado](#), who is providing [technical assistance](#) to the health department to train staff and other stakeholders on principles and practices of community organizing, relevant housing policy, and power mapping.

- Supporting roles: Funding, Leadership Development, Alliances and Coalitions, Advocacy and Policy

### **Boston Impact Initiative invests in community real estate with City Life / Vida Urbana**

The [Boston Impact Initiative Fund](#) (BII) is a non-extractive, equity-driven charitable loan fund that invests capital into community-driven projects, including [City Life / Vida Urbana's \(CLVU\) Community Land Trust](#). CLVU is a grassroots base-building organization building the power of low-income communities to achieve racial, social, economic, and gender justice. A long-time leader in the national housing justice movement, CLVU worked to create [permanent and deeply affordable housing models such as Community Land Trusts](#), but often ran up against the difficulties of mobilizing enough capital to acquire and renovate properties without displacing current residents. The Boston Impact Initiative helped solve this problem by providing grants and low-cost loans to CLVU, making it possible to acquire land quickly. CLVU now serves on BII's board of directors, guiding investments into other community-led projects.

### **CDFI Loan Fund Shared Capital Cooperative Helps Finance Massive Housing Coop**

After years of fighting for their homes, members of [Inquilinxs Unidxs \(United Renters for Justice\)](#) – referenced above – are collectively buying their homes and realizing their vision of community-

run, democratically-controlled, safe, and affordable housing. The [Sky Without Limits Cooperative](#), which is comprised of 40 families living in 5 buildings formerly owned by Steve Frenz in South Minneapolis, secured financing to purchase their homes with the help of Shared Capital Cooperative and real estate broker Land Bank Twin Cities Inc. [Shared Capital Cooperative](#) is a national CDFI loan fund that connects co-ops and capital to build economic democracy. Working with capital invested by the cooperative sector and its allies, they provide low- to no-interest loans for the expansion and startup of cooperatively-owned businesses and housing throughout the US. Steve Frenz finally sold the buildings to Land Bank Twin Cities Inc, with a purchase agreement that promises to resell the buildings directly to the housing co-op in two years. [Land Bank Twin Cities](#) is a Twin Cities-based organization specializing in land acquisition, development and preservation, as well as real estate financing and brokering. With the purchase of their homes, the [Sky Without Limits Cooperative](#) stopped their pending evictions and have won permanently affordable housing for generations to come.

### **Why the health sector should collaborate with community power building organizations**

One of the [ten essential services](#) of a public health system is to “mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems.” As awareness grows about the importance of housing as a social determinant of health, the health sector — including health departments, hospitals, health plans, providers, and others — has a

valuable opportunity to partner with housing justice organizations to identify and address health inequities.

Although some health organizations may have limited experience with community organizing groups, housing organizers can be excellent partners to engage those most impacted by inequities and to advance social change. Specifically, housing organizers can bring:

- Relationships with community members directly impacted by inequitable housing conditions and with other local organizations
- A clear vision and skills around leadership development and building power to make long-lasting change
- A structural understanding and experience working to advance equitable policy changes at the local or state level

One of the key lessons learned from health organizations who have partnered with community organizers is the importance of [“inside/outside” strategies](#) to advance equitable housing conditions.

“Inside” the health institutions, staff can identify opportunities to mobilize research, funding, or administrative powers to highlight existing inequities and community-identified solutions. For example, health departments can:

- Collect data on living conditions, housing stability, and evictions as part of routine home visiting programs
- Revoke permits and hold landlords accountable for addressing uninhabitable living conditions, in order to protect the health of vulnerable communities

- Act as “neutral” conveners across institutions and centering community perspectives to build more attention and political will to address particular topics like housing affordability or habitability

“Outside” the health institutions, community organizers can:

- Advocate for the health institutions to adopt housing as a priority health issue

- Request that institutions collect and share data on housing conditions or analyze the potential health and equity impacts of a proposed policy
- Help elevate the voices of impacted residents in decision-making tables
- Educate staff about power and community organizing

## Tips for Starting a Collaboration with Community Organizers

### **Identify local community organizing groups.**

[Check out this list of organizations](#) to find organizers in your state/area. If you don't find any local community organizing groups, see if your local food bank or other similar service providers have staff that engage their members and talk with them about supporting local organizing work.

### **Seek out new relationships.**

Don't just go out with the people you know — seek out new relationships with people who are building community members' leadership and power.

### **Do your homework.**

Before inviting the person out for coffee, read up about the work they're doing by looking up their organization online.

### **Be flexible and persistent.**

Organizers often have very busy and evolving schedules, so try to accommodate their priorities as you schedule a time to meet. You may need to reach out by text or social media!

### **Remember meeting up is not lobbying or advocacy.**

Remember that having coffee or tea together and working together is NOT lobbying or advocacy — it's building relationships with those working on the root causes of health inequities.

### **[Additional information, examples and resources](#)**



# Recommendations for allying with the housing justice movement

**T**hese recommendations can apply to different actors and organizations, including those in the community development field, and those working in health who want to address housing as a social determinant of health. Importantly, the process for developing partnerships and the details of those partnerships will look different depending on the type or organization.

## **Fund community power building organizations**

Directly fund community power building organizations that have a focus on housing justice. Ensure funding requirements are a good match for the capacity and activities of these organizations. Organizations that are not primarily funders, such as research and advocacy nonprofits or public agencies, can subcontract with base-building organizations when they partner with them on projects or in coalitions.

## **Collaborate with community power building organizations on research**

Partner with community power building housing justice organizations on participatory research projects in a way that explicitly shares power and builds member leadership. If the organizers don't have capacity to participate in the entire research project, make sure they are involved early on to help determine what problems and solutions should be investigated and how findings could fit into a policy agenda.

## **Bring community power building organizations into coalitions**

Advocate for the inclusion of base-building housing justice organizations in existing and emerging coalitions working on housing and community development. This may mean shifting the culture and process of coalition meetings and activities to welcome new styles of participation.

## Advance the research base to connect housing justice and health

Contribute to research that makes connections between public health and policies that increase tenant power and community ownership of housing. There is already significant research connecting housing *problems* and poor health, or access to housing and resource-rich neighborhoods and improved health. More research is needed to connect tenant protection policies and democratization of housing (such as cooperatives and land trusts) to health and equity.

## Change the housing narrative

Use research and communications to contribute to narrative change that advances

housing justice framing, for example:

- Presents the current housing crisis and housing inequities in the context of explicit policy decisions and power structures that created the crisis
- Highlights the role of base-building organizations in equitable community development and policy processes
- Portrays the equitable distribution of resources so that everyone has decent, affordable housing as an achievable goal
- Normalizes government intervention in housing in order to improve issues like stability and quality with clear connections to health
- Normalizes public and cooperative housing models as an alternative to private ownership

# Appendix

## A. Another Framework for Understanding Power and Social Change

Another helpful framework for understanding social change and power comes from Jane McAlevey, an organizer and author with decades of experience in the labor movement. She distinguishes between three models for making social change: *Advocacy*, *mobilizing*, and *organizing*. This framework is not an alternative to the dimensions of power used in this document, but overlaps those dimensions — each of these models operates within all 3 dimensions of power, but uses different theories of change and strategies.

Many public health and community development professionals work under

*advocacy* or *mobilizing* models, while community power-building organizations generally strive to use an *organizing* model. The organizing model that McAlevey describes is aligned with transformative organizing, using individual campaigns as part of a broader community power-building strategy.

However, as with the concept of power in general, these three models can be used to advance changes that support *or* harm health and equity. For example, the National Rifle Association has utilized all three models to advance gun rights in the United States for decades. Community power building as discussed in this document is explicitly tied to building a more equitable world.

# Options for Change

Adapted from “No Shortcuts” by Jane McAlevey

	Advocacy	Mobilizing	Organizing
<b>Theory of power</b>	<p><b>Elite</b></p> <p>Assumes elites will always rule and just need more friendlier elite</p> <p>Advocacy groups tend to seek one-time wins or narrow policy changes, often through courts or back-room negotiations that do not permanently alter the relations of power</p>	<p><b>Primarily elite</b></p> <p>Assumes elites need to make better informed decisions</p> <p>Staff or activists set goals with low to medium concession costs or, more typically, set an ambitious goal and declare a win, even when the “win” has no, or only weak enforcement provisions</p> <p>Backroom, secret deal making by paid professionals is common</p>	<p><b>Mass, inclusive, and collective</b></p> <p>Assumes power shouldn’t be concentrated in the elite and that the only way to challenge elite power is by organizing large numbers of ordinary people</p> <p>Organizing groups transform the power structure to favor constituents and diminish the power of their opposition</p> <p>Specific campaigns fit into a larger power-building strategy. They prioritize power analysis, involve ordinary people in it, and decipher the often hidden relationship between economic, social, and political power</p> <p>Settlement typically comes from mass negotiations with large numbers involved</p>
<b>What are the root causes of the problem?</b>	<p>Policy/laws need to be modified or introduced</p>	<p>Policy/laws need to be modified or introduced</p> <p>People need to be educated about their rights</p>	<p>System is structured to benefit those in power</p> <p>Community power needs to be built and exercised to demand power and accountability</p> <p>Large numbers of people making demands will change the system</p>
<b>Who is best positioned to do the work?</b>	<p>Paid lawyers</p> <p>Lobbyists</p> <p>Pollsters</p> <p>Researchers</p> <p>Public relations professionals</p>	<p>Professional staff and volunteer activists speaking <i>on behalf of</i> impacted communities</p> <p>Social media and communications experts</p>	<p>People impacted by decision-making</p> <p>Organizers that build these people’s capacity to advocate for improved conditions themselves</p>



	<b>Advocacy</b>	<b>Mobilizing</b>	<b>Organizing</b>
<b>Strategies and tactics to build power</b>	<p>Litigation</p> <p>Heavy spending on polling, advertising, and other paid media</p>	<p>Campaigns that focus on frames and messaging</p> <p>“Authentic messengers” chosen to represent the constituency to the media and policy makers, but who have little input into decision-making</p>	<p>Recruitment and involvement of people whose power is derived from their ability to withdraw labor or other cooperation from those who rely on them</p> <p>Individual, face to face interactions are key</p> <p>Leadership development</p> <p>Base building</p> <p>Political + power analyses</p> <p>Majority strikes</p> <p>Sustained and strategic nonviolent direct action</p> <p>Electoral majorities</p> <p>Frames matter, but numbers of people involved influence media strategy</p> <p>Mobilizing is seen as a tactic, not a strategy</p>

## B. RWJF Lead Local Project's Glossary of Terms

### **Community Power:**

Community power is the ability of communities most impacted by structural inequity to develop, sustain and grow an organized base of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision-makers that change systems and advance health equity. ([USC Equity Research Institute](#))

### **Community Power Building:**

Community power building is the set of strategies used by communities most impacted by structural inequity to develop, sustain and grow an organized base of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision-makers that change systems and advance health equity. Community power building is particularly critical for underserved, underrepresented, and historically marginalized communities who have been excluded from decision-making on the policies and practices that impact their health and the health of their communities. ([USC Equity Research Institute](#))

### **Health Equity:**

Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination,

and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care. (<https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2017/05/what-is-health-equity-.html>)

### **Social Determinants of Health:**

Commonly referred to as the social determinants of health, these are the “conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age” that influence health. ([https://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/sdh\\_definition/en/](https://www.who.int/social_determinants/sdh_definition/en/)) Such conditions include “economic stability, education, social and community context, health and health care, and neighborhood and built environment” (Definition from [Healthy People 2020](#)). Political and economic factors, power imbalances (for example, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and ableism), and systemic injustice also constitute the conditions that determine health inequity. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK425845/>)

### **Base Building:**

A diverse set of strategies and methods to support community members to: be in relationship with one another; invest in each other's leadership; share a common identity shaped by similar experiences and an understanding of the root causes of their conditions; and to use their collective analysis to create solutions and strategize to achieve them. ([USC Equity Research Institute](#))

### **Community Power Building Organizations (CPBOs) Groups:**

Organizations that may be identified by geography (local, state, regional, national), demography (e.g. youth, workers, multi-racial) or issue(s) (e.g. workers rights, environmental justice, multi-issue) who conduct a range of activities including base-building. Other terms sometimes used to describe CBPOs include but are not limited to: grassroots organizing groups, social movement groups, movement-building organizations, community-based organizations, community organizing groups, base building groups.

### **Community Organizer:**

Community organizers, one type of staff person working at CPBOs, bring the most impacted communities together—through door knocking in neighborhoods and apartment buildings and through institutions like schools and churches—to learn and strategize about how to make, as multiple interviewees described, “material changes in their living conditions.” While organizers across place and issue employ diverse ranges of tactics and strategies—from leadership development trainings to political education curricula to healing circles—it’s about bringing people together to help them make connections across their lived experiences and conditions. ([USC Equity Research Institute](#))

# Endnotes

- 1 Federal government housing benefits include mortgage interest and property tax deductions, Housing Choice Vouchers, Section-8 Project Based, Public Housing, Housing for the Elderly (Section 202) and Housing for People with Disabilities (Section 811) Programs. Source: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/chart-book-federal-housing-spending-is-poorly-matched-to-need#One>
- 2 GPP adopted their analysis from Stephen Lukes, a political and social theorist who wrote about the “three faces of power” in his 1974 book *Power: A Radical View*. While both Lukes and GPP use the term “faces,” we use “dimensions” because we have found that it’s a more intuitive concept.
- 3 For examples of different theories of power, see the Options for Change table in the Appendix adapted from “No Shortcuts” by Jane McAlevey.
- 4 For more on these distinction, see the Appendix and the Options for Change table adapted from “No Shortcuts” by Jane McAlevey



