

Housing is a Human Right!

A Human Rights-based Housing Strategy and Action Plan for Pittsburgh, PA

*Draft discussion document*¹ (public input welcome)

The right to a place to live is one of the most fundamental rights of all. It is recognized in international law and binding on all governments everywhere. **We call on the City of Pittsburgh to recognize housing as a human right and to adopt and work toward a human-rights based strategy for housing in the city.** This strategy must, at a minimum:

- Recognize the right of city residents to **remain** in their homes and for those displaced to **return**;
- Take steps to protect and empower **tenants**;
- Create and expand **social and community housing** options in the city;
- End tax breaks and subsidies for developers and invest in **permanently affordable, publicly controlled** housing.

Background

Pittsburgh's housing challenges are part of a global housing crisis. That crisis is complex and plays out differently in different communities, but the essentials are easy to understand:

- Housing is treated as a commodity instead of as a human right. That means that the rights of property-owners matter more than people's right to a safe, affordable place to live.
- Housing markets are now global, and big private banks and wealth funds invest the extra capital of rich people in housing and all over the world in search of profits.
- Often these houses, or "assets," are not inhabited by the owners. More and more, they are not inhabited at all or they are turned into short-term, high-profit rentals. Many houses and apartments sit empty much of the time so that when opportunities for profit arise, they can be sold quickly.
- Big banks and wealth funds are also buying what used to be called "public housing" all over the planet, or contracting with governments to run housing complexes for a fixed fee. To maximize their profits, the corporations neglect maintenance and upkeep.
- Meanwhile, cities seeking to attract high-skilled and high-income workers encourage developers to build luxury housing that is not designed for families, often granting huge subsidies if the developers make some small number of new units "affordable" for a limited period of time.
- Often this development displaces vulnerable people—people (frequently single mothers and children) in impoverished and precarious communities and especially communities of

¹ This text was prepared by a task force of Pittsburgh activists engaged in a roundtable of regional housing justice advocates and in community forums hosted by the [Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance](#) and partner organizations over recent years. Please share your suggestions, questions, and other ideas with us at pghrights@riseup.net. Also, let us know if you want to be involved in future work to advance this action plan.

color. Their houses are the cheapest ones to buy and demolish or transform into high-profit luxury housing, which again is often subsidized.

- This cycle drives up rents and property values and drives out residents by shrinking the supply of truly affordable, family-friendly housing. It also transfers public resources, our tax dollars and assets, to private corporations.²

There is a better way—the Human Rights Way

The basic problem is that treating housing as an asset means that profit and private property rights trump human rights and social needs. We need policies that recognize that housing plays a key role in building, preserving, and strengthening our communities by addressing the needs and ensuring the health and well-being of every resident of our city.

We start with the human right to housing. Everyone has a right to a safe and affordable place to live. According to international law, all governments must take steps to fulfill this right in a timely way. They must commit public resources to making sure the right to housing is fulfilled—and find new resources, if necessary.

A human rights-based housing policy starts from recognizing housing as a fundamental right and a *social* good. It prioritizes this right over profits and property. It prioritizes those who are most vulnerable by ending housing insecurity and displacement, with special attention to those who have suffered from historical racism and rising inequality.

Housing policy is not limited to physical dwellings, however. It has to address the social supports needed to keep people housed and to find homes for those who are unhoused, including social services, public transit, employment. The entire government must work together to protect and fulfill the right to housing.

There must be public involvement at every step of the way from identifying needs and setting goals to implementing policies and monitoring progress.³ Housing policy impacts the character of our city, and it impacts everyone, so shaping it cannot be left mainly to developers!

It is especially important to stop transferring public resources to private individuals and corporations through subsidies and tax abatements. This corporate welfare makes corporations rich while making the housing crisis worse. Specifically, new “affordable” units are usually not enough to replace the housing lost to new development, they are not made permanently affordable, and their “affordability” is determined through formulas that are usually inadequate to address the needs of the most marginalized residents.

² Leilani Farha, [The Shift Directives on Financialization and Human Rights](#) (June 2022).

³ These principles are explained in [Rights Based Housing Strategies-Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing](#), Feb-March 2018 (UN A/HRC/37/53), and in [Guidelines for the implementation of the right to adequate housing](#) (UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, 2019 [A/HRC/43/43]).

A Human Rights-based Housing Strategy for Pittsburgh

A human rights approach puts people and communities first, and considers the social dimensions of housing policies. It directs public resources toward our needs and goals, not towards profits. This approach calls on the City to implement these policies and to lobby Harrisburg for the legislative changes that would give it the power to implement those presently outside its authority.

1. Recognize the right of city residents to remain in their homes and to return if they have been displaced. To do this, the City should:
 - a. Change the City development plan to prevent displacement and incorporate fair housing and anti-displacement standards into the approval process for all development proposals.⁴
 - b. Enact fair and reasonable policies to ensure that residents with housing assistance are not displaced when their aid ends or when their incomes increase.
 - c. Create and encourage opportunities for tenants and communities to purchase homes open to development or demolition. Occupants should have the first right to purchase and remain in their homes, with public assistance where appropriate.
 - d. Make sure that all unhoused people have safe, decent places to stay while they transition to permanent housing.
2. Take steps to protect and empower tenants.⁵
 - a. Create and expand legal protections for renters by establishing a Tenant's Bill of Rights that includes: enacting of an ordinance requiring codified "[just cause](#)" for residential lease terminations and the right to free legal help,⁶ [publicly funded mediation services](#) that prevent initial eviction filings, and protection from eviction.
 - b. [Vigorously defend the City's right to establish a rental registry](#) and implement a rental unit licensing program that includes proactive inspections.
 - c. Mandate an urgent repair program to alleviate unsafe and unhealthy conditions, with protections against landlord retaliation, and consider creative funding for this program.⁷
 - d. Advocate for changes to state laws to allow caps on rent increases.
3. Create and expand social and community housing options in the city.⁸
 - a. Transform the City Housing Authority (HACP) into an agency that creates community-controlled, well-maintained, permanently affordable housing.
 - b. Support, politically and financially, the development of Community Land Trusts and cooperative housing and the use of the Pittsburgh Land Bank to transfer vacant, abandoned, and City-owned land for these purposes.⁹
 - c. Support people who want to occupy, improve, and acquire vacant and delinquent tax property.

⁴ [AFFH Task Force recommendation #1](#)

⁵ See "[Tenants Rights Advance in California](#)" and "[Top 6 Tenant Protections Renters Are Fighting For.](#)"

⁶ [AFFH Task Force recommendation #3](#)

⁷ [AFFH Task Force recommendation #12](#)

⁸ See "[Public housing must be part of fair housing planning.](#)"

⁹ [AFFH Task Force recommendation #6](#)

4. End tax breaks and subsidies for developers, regulate finance to prevent speculation in housing, and invest in permanently affordable, publicly controlled housing.
 - a. No public money should go to support private development.
 - b. Direct public money to social and community housing.
 - c. Create development plans that maximize returns for communities and their residents.

An Action Plan for the Human Right to Housing

Many organizations and people have already worked hard to develop fair and just housing policies for our cities. Their recommendations provide a strong foundation for our work, and we will work to advance and build on their ideas going forward.

1. [Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Task Force Recommendations](#)
 1. The City must take concrete steps to eliminate barriers to housing, particularly those created by decades of racially discriminatory housing policies.
 2. The City must work to remedy the persistent racial inequities and lasting harms created by policies such as redlining and residential segregation.
2. Pittsburgh Planning Commission's [Resolution of Concern-Re: Penn Plaza--\(Penn Plaza Support and Action Coalition statement on the City Planning Commission's Resolution of Concern\)](#).
 1. The Planning Commission must be empowered to address the social and ecological impacts of development, including its impacts on housing affordability and displacement.
 2. The Planning Commission must be democratized to enable meaningful participation by residents, especially those most impacted.
3. [Equitable Development: The Path to an All-In Pittsburgh](#)
 1. Capacities of residents—especially those most impacted—must be strengthened to level the playing field and ensure democratic, equitable participation and people-centered and policy agendas.