

Affordable Housing Diocesan Guidance for Congregations:

1. Church land sometimes comes with restrictions – from the original donor or from local zoning regulations. These need to be understood early on. Most congregations are considered non-conforming uses of land zoned as residential because churches are seen as “low-impact” structures. Changing the uses of the property can trigger zoning issues and challenges.
2. Many programs that involve housing issues require substantial on-going maintenance and governance. These are not “set and forget” programs. Before a congregation commits to such programs, it must determine if it wants to be in the housing business – which includes land-lord/tenant relations, insurance costs, maintenance costs, etc. Congregations should assess their financial capacity to both build and operate/maintain their housing endeavors both now and in the decades to come. Housing is long-term ministry.
3. Collaborating with other organizations can reduce the level of administrative, governance, and maintenance commitments that physical housing projects require. But collaboration comes with other costs – notably loss of autonomy, potential restrictions on other uses of the property, and differing views of future commitments.
4. Almost all programs require that someone donate the property for free or allow its use for free and that someone is the organization with the property – which is the church. Missionsⁱ in the Episcopal polity, do not have control over the property as a mission is not separately incorporated. Moreover, no Episcopal congregation can sell or encumber any property without the express permission of the Standing Committee and Bishop. So, any congregation contemplating any project that involves the sale or lease or other encumbrance of the property needs to work early on with either the Board of Directors (for missions) and/or the Standing Committee (for parishesⁱⁱ). Included in those discussions will be the Joint Finance Panel which includes representatives from all governing bodies of the Diocese.
5. Housing is a complex and potentially divisive issue – in communities, and in congregations. Any congregation considering such a project must spend the time to listen to concerns, weigh the level of commitment of the congregation (and not just the commitment of the advocates within the congregation), and discern whether the commitment and the leadership is prepared to “stay the course” for decades to come. Engaging in housing projects are long-term commitments – rather like a major building campaign – and thus must have wide “buy-in” from the congregation. Attacking our housing problems cannot be done in a year or so. Building housing is inherently a long-term commitment for any congregation.
6. “Check-book” ministry is often dismissed as unworthy of those who really care. But many existing organizations, with proven track records in this field, struggle to make payroll every month and depend on donations. Our own Chaplains on the Harbor could use more support from congregations that may have the desire to help but cannot operate complex housing programs. Other such organizations need our support and providing money is always a means of assisting. Money matters.
7. Congregations could partner with programs that provide instruction/counseling/coaching to work with those vulnerable people in their community. Some congregation have rooms under-utilized and could make them available free or at very low cost to other social service agencies.

- a. We know that literacy in English is one of the most powerful indices of getting settled in this country. Providing literacy and English language training is a critical area that is much needed.
- b. Connecting with our Refugee Resettlement Office and asking about model programs that could be duplicated in the congregation's area could be most helpful. The RRO has been at the work of helping our newest Americans since the 1970's and has much expertise in this area.

8. Working in the public policy sphere on these issues is something all congregations can do. Writing campaigns to public officials, hosting informational talks for the general public, and other advocacy activities are not trivial elements if we hope to address our housing challenges.

ⁱ Missions are congregations with a Vicar and a Bishop's Committee

ⁱⁱ Parishes are congregations with a Rector and Vestry