Alliance for Housing Justice

Social Housing Models: Public Housing

What Is Public Housing?

Public housing is the nation's oldest federal rental assistance program, authorized by the U.S. Housing Act of 1937. It provides decent, safe, and affordable rental units to over a million low-income households. The program is administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which provides federal funding, while day-to-day ownership and management are handled by more than 3,000 local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs).

Who Owns and Manages Public Housing?

Public housing is owned by the government and operated by local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs), which are state-chartered local agencies. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides federal funding and oversight, but the day-to-day management, maintenance, and tenant selection are handled by the local PHA. There are over 3,000 PHAs across the country managing roughly 920,000 public housing units.

How is Public Housing Social Housing?

Many of the basic principles of social housing are met with public housing: it is permanently affordable and decommodified, publicly owned, and has generally strong tenant protections and a level of tenant governance that could be improved, but is significantly stronger than what exists in the private housing market.

What is the Current State of Public Housing?

The public housing stock is aging and shrinking despite the need escalating. Funding cuts, driven by racism and austerity policies, have left public housing with a $70 Billion backlog of needed maintenance and repairs which has led to an approximate loss of 100,000 public housing units annually either through demolition or conversion. Many units are lost each year to demolition or conversion to other programs. For example, the massive backlog of capital repairs in some public housing developments, has led some Public Housing Authorities to convert

properties out of public housing through programs like the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) in order to access private funding for renovations. Finally, federal law currently prohibits PHAs from increasing the total number of public housing units beyond what they had in 1999 (known as the Faircloth limit).

As a result of all of these issues, the number of units has declined from about 1.3 million in the 1990s to just under 920,000 today.

Why Is It Important to Preserve & Build More Public Housing?

Repairing existing and building more public housing is essential because the existing stock is shrinking while the need for deeply affordable housing continues to grow. The private housing market consistently fails to produce housing affordable to the lowest-income households and other existing low-income housing programs are insufficient to meet the need. The critical feature of public housing rents set at 30% of someone's income makes public housing more affordable to the average low income tenant, unlike other affordable housing programs. Expanding the public housing stock would address several critical national problems.

Public housing fills a gap the private, for profit, market will not and that other affordable housing programs cannot. The United States faces a severe shortage of affordable homes for the lowest-income renters, estimated at over 7 million units. Public housing is one of the few tools that provides permanently affordable units targeted specifically to these families, who otherwise face severe cost burdens or homelessness.

Why Does Public Housing Have a Bad Reputation?

Public housing's negative reputation is not primarily the result of the program's inherent design, but rather a consequence of deliberate political choices: decades of chronic defunding and a sustained push toward privatization. These forces created the visible deterioration and concentrated poverty that critics then point to as proof that public housing "doesn't work."

Defunding created the conditions critics blame on the program itself. For decades, Congress has failed to adequately fund public housing operations and capital repairs, leaving housing authorities unable to maintain aging buildings. In 1985, the Reagan administration slashed federal maintenance funding from roughly $35 billion to $7 billion annually, effectively starving the program of the resources needed to keep units habitable.

Privatization has been used to reduce the stock rather than preserve it. Federal policy has actively discouraged the growth and even the maintenance of public housing. Congress stopped funding new public housing construction in the 1990s and capped the number of units housing authorities could operate at 1999 levels. Since then, more than 250,000 public housing units have been lost—demolished, sold, or

converted to vouchers—rather than repaired or replaced. Programs like HOPE VI and the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) have transferred public housing into private or mixed-finance ownership, often reducing the number of deeply affordable units in the process. As public housing scholar Lawrence Vale has noted, the image of public housing deteriorated alongside its physical condition, and political leaders used that deterioration to justify moving away from the program rather than fixing it.