

2020 ISSUE PAPER: AFFORDABLE HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

Position Statement

The League of Women Voters of the United States believes that “the federal government shares with other levels of government the responsibility to provide equality of opportunity for education, employment **and housing** [*emphasis added*] for all persons in the US regardless of their race, color, gender, religion, national origin, age, sexual orientation or disability. In order to promote self-sufficiency for individuals and families, the LWVUS supports policies and programs designed to prevent or reduce poverty.”

The LWVUS has worked on fair housing since the late 1960’s and supported passage of Fair Housing since 1980. In 2002, the LWVUS formally endorsed legislation to establish the National Housing Trust Fund, which uses surplus funds from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) to create new housing for low-income families. In 2005, LWVUS urged Congress to create the Affordable Housing Fund, a long overdue step toward addressing the housing crisis that confronts very low- and extremely low-income families. It also urged House members to protect activities of the nonprofit groups providing the bulk of housing services for our poorest communities.

LWVUS has specific criteria for income assistance, supportive services, and housing supply in *Impact on Issues 2018-2020* (<https://tinyurl.com/2020IOI>).

The LWVWA policy on housing, HO-1, states that: “All levels of government and the private sector share the responsibility to help alleviate the housing shortage in the low income sector. Identifying housing needs and planning to meet these needs is best done at the local level. The state should set minimum standards for safe and decent housing and provide for their enforcement. Policies should be formulated to allow for maximum use of available federal funding as well as encourage the participation of industry, business, local and nonprofit groups in meeting housing needs. The state government should provide information, assistance and coordination for housing programs at all levels.”

The Washington State Department of Commerce reported a shortage of affordable housing units in the state upward of 220,000 units in 2018. This data has not been updated. Data about homelessness is mixed and inconsistent, but the 2018 point in time count indicated 23,300 homeless individuals on that one night, up from 2017. In addition, public school data reported an estimated 39,100 students experiencing homelessness in 2017 (the most recent data available).

Extrapolating from that number, based on the annual count in certain counties, there may be more than 225,000 people experiencing homelessness each year in Washington State, an estimate ironically similar to the gap in affordable housing.

The recent burgeoning numbers of people experiencing homelessness have to do with the widening gap between housing costs (purchase and rental), which are increasing dramatically, and wages, which are not. Even middle class families are now at risk of losing their housing as a result of a medical or other emergency costs for which they have no savings or insufficient income to cover. A majority of the people experiencing homelessness are actually employed. There is a disproportionate ratio of people of color among those experiencing homelessness relative to the population at large, reflecting historic and systemic racial biases.

There are a number of programs currently available that are intended to address affordable housing. The state Growth Management Act requires comprehensive plans to include an analysis of existing and projected housing needs and description of how those needs will be met. A document recording fee initially established temporarily to support county development of affordable housing plans was recently made permanent to support operation of local homeless housing programs. There is a State Housing Trust Fund that operates on a revolving basis to fund affordable housing. One of the issues that exists in spite of these requirements and opportunities is the length of time it takes to construct new housing and the gaps between available funding and overall need.

There are also a multitude of programs, primarily provided by private non-profit organizations and networks, that assist individuals experiencing homelessness. However, there is a dearth of shelters, particularly for families, youth and individuals with pets. There is also a dearth of transitional housing, short-term housing with accompanying wrap-around services intended to re-stabilize individuals with re-employment, new housing and other support that will allow them to remain housed in a more permanent situation. There is great need for increased case management, shared housing, rapid re-housing, supportive housing and other associated support services to persons who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing homelessness.

During the 2019 legislative session, a great deal of legislation was passed to address homelessness causes and effects. This includes, among others:

- Authorization for local jurisdictions to retain a portion of state sales tax to fund supportive housing
- Exemption from real estate excise tax (REET) for self-help housing
- Authorization for local governments to use REET for affordable housing
- Appropriation of \$175 million to the state Housing Trust Fund
- Several forms of authorization for local governments to increase density for purposes of increasing affordable housing
- Tenant protection enhancements, such as increasing the notice to pay or vacate and for rent increases
- Allowance for judicial discretion in eviction proceedings
- Additional protection for homeowners in non-payment of property tax
- Property tax exemptions for disabled veterans and for senior citizens, with a progressive basis
- Increase in Housing & Essential Needs (HEN) program funding
- Expansion of the McKinney Vento program to support homeless students
- Pilot program for colleges to provide support services

One measure that did not pass was the capital gains tax, which would have allowed more state funding for homeless programs.

Among the proposals anticipated in the 2020 session which League would support are these:

- Supplemental funding for the Housing Trust Fund and HEN program
- Just cause protection for tenants potentially evicted
- Three-month payment plan for first, last and damage deposit payments upon moving into a rental unit
- REET exemption for a non-profit that intends to retain affordable housing status of a purchased property
- Reversal of cuts to the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program

Additional measures are likely, and as they are put forth, they will be measured against the League positions cited above to determine whether they will receive League support.

Issue Chair: Cynthia Stewart, cstewart@lwwwa.org