



Building A Strategy

Create a Successful Housing Strategy and Tailor It to Your Community

Overview Introduction

Each of the individual housing policies discussed in HousingPolicy.org has the potential to contribute to a solution to a community's housing needs. But no one policy by itself is likely to be enough. This is due in part to the complexity of the problem. There are many factors that have contributed to our growing housing affordability problems. Different policies are needed to address each of these factors and meaningfully expand the supply of homes affordable to working families.

The Building a Strategy section discusses how to go beyond individual housing policies to develop an effective and comprehensive housing strategy. The Q&As in this Overview section review the basics of a housing strategy and why it's needed. Subsequent sections address the process of **setting goals** for a housing strategy, **creating a plan**, and **key ingredients** for making it work. Building a Strategy also provides **profiles** of a number of comprehensive housing strategies developed by states and localities around the country as well as a discussion of the **connections** between housing and other social policies, including transportation, energy, health and education policy.

What is a comprehensive housing strategy?

A comprehensive housing strategy is an approach used by a growing number of states and localities to move beyond individual and disconnected housing policies toward an overall housing strategy that ensures the jurisdiction's policies are well-coordinated and well-tailored to meet their objectives.

In its broadest form, a comprehensive housing strategy focuses on issues of housing supply, affordability, and quality to ensure that housing is available and affordable for families at all income levels. Some communities choose to take a comprehensive and strategic approach to developing a housing plan to assist a more specific population, such as the homeless, the elderly, or working families.

Comprehensive housing strategies are usually developed through inclusive, detailed planning processes involving the following steps:

1. Convening of multiple agencies and stakeholders.

While some government agencies develop their housing strategies internally, many of the most successful plans are built on the foundation of broad input from a wide spectrum of stakeholders. The early and consistent involvement of the different government agencies whose collaboration is needed to

"One of the most fundamental differences between a strategy and a series of efforts in the absence of a strategy, is that a strategy has a body of goals and a series of objectives through which those goals can be reached.

It is the existence of those goals and objectives that enable all of the participants to see their role clearly, and to work together with the others to make them a reality. Without them, one may have a series of sound program elements or activities, but it is questionable whether one can call it a strategy."

--from *An Affordable Housing Strategy for Stamford, CT*

address the many facets of a community's housing challenges is also important.

2. Clarification of the community's goals. One of the first tasks for communities seeking to develop a more strategic approach to housing policy is to identify the specific problems the community is trying to solve and to analyze the root causes of these problems. This analysis is often informed by a formal assessment of the community's needs as well as thorough discussion among stakeholders.

Ideally, this process leads to the identification of specific public policy objectives that address specific problems (e.g., "Reduce regulatory barriers to development so the market can respond effectively to increases in demand for housing," "Expand funding for predevelopment and acquisition costs so nonprofits can be more effective in producing affordable housing," etc.) as well as overall numerical goals (e.g., "Build 10,000 new rental units in the next 10 years") and milestones used to measure progress toward those goals.

3. Coordinated development of multiple housing policies to meet these goals. In most communities, the needs assessment and goals-setting process will identify a variety of specific housing challenges to be addressed through public policy. Through consultations with stakeholders, discussions with key agency staff, a review of best practices, and input from knowledgeable consultants, a comprehensive list of policies can be developed to meet these various challenges.

4. An implementation timeline, with short-term benchmarks to track progress and responsible parties designated for each step. This can help officials and stakeholders to ensure that implementation stays on track and community goals continue to be met.

Once a comprehensive housing strategy has been developed, it of course needs to be adopted, funded, implemented, and monitored. This is by no means an easy process, and many well-conceived plans never get fully or effectively implemented. The **Ingredients for Success** section reviews some of the lessons learned about effective implementation.

Why does my community need one?

As in other public policy areas, the current set of housing policies in effect in any given community generally reflects a series of discrete policy decisions and compromises made over the course of many years. Some policies were developed more recently, while others were developed many years ago. Because housing markets change over time, some of these policies may no longer be up-to-date. Others may in fact be counterproductive or may conflict with one another. In many cases, there are housing programs to address certain pieces of the housing challenge, but not others. Periodically reviewing the community's overall approach to meeting its housing needs can ensure that policies are up-to-date and in sync as part of an effective strategy.

A comprehensive housing strategy is also important for broadening the range of actors and agencies involved in working together to solve a community's housing problems. As indicated by the high-impact policies reviewed in the **Toolbox** section of this site, the solutions to a community's housing challenges will likely require action by multiple agencies, including those responsible for planning, housing, tax, building inspections, and other policies. It also will require significant involvement by the private and non-profit sectors. A comprehensive housing strategy can bring all of these players to the table and facilitate cooperation.

Finally, the specific numerical goals set out in a comprehensive housing strategy can help a community

track progress toward a solution and provide a trigger for reconsidering elements of the strategy if progress is not made as fast as needed or intended.

Who is responsible for preparing it?

Most comprehensive housing strategies are prepared by a taskforce drawn from a wide range of stakeholder groups, including but not limited to: local government officials, for-profit and nonprofit developers and builders active in the area, representatives from community development groups, members of neighborhood organizations, banks and other funders of affordable housing initiatives, real estate professionals, employers seeking affordable housing for their workers, affordable housing advocates, and resident representatives.

In assembling an affordable housing taskforce, it is important to go beyond the loudest voices and be as inclusive as possible. In particular, it is important to ensure adequate representation by the private sector. Nonprofits are essential to affordable housing development, but they cannot meet the nation's housing needs all by themselves. Ultimately, the private sector has a major role to play in expanding the supply of affordable homes. Involvement by members of the for-profit development community can help ensure the correct configuration of incentives and other supports to motivate the private sector to provide more affordable homes. Employers and other members of the business community also have a stake in making sure there is enough housing to support a stable workforce. Their participation can help to broaden the base of political support for the taskforce recommendations and ensure it meets the area's workforce needs. (**Click here** for more on the role of the private sector.)

By involving a broadly representative group of housing practitioners and other stakeholders in the planning process, local officials can capitalize on years of experience while building a constituency of partners to support and assist in implementation. In many cases, employees of government housing agencies provide staff support for the task force and help translate members' ideas into actionable plans. Some communities also choose to bring in an outside consultant to assist in the process.

Don't we already have a comprehensive housing strategy?

Some communities do in fact have comprehensive and well-conceived housing strategies that were developed through a broad and inclusive planning process. In such cases, it may be more important to move forward with executing the existing plan than to create a new one. This is an issue that arises sometimes when a new mayor, county executive or governor assumes office. Some newly elected officials feel compelled to develop their own housing strategy rather than implement one developed during their predecessor's tenure through a comprehensive and broadly representative process. Unfortunately, this can set back years of progress. Even when everything goes well, it may take years to implement a comprehensive housing strategy, and this process may well transcend the boundaries of specific administrations.

On the other hand, it is important not to confuse the type of strategic approach to housing discussed in the Building a Strategy section with several other documents that have similar names. Most larger communities and all states submit a Consolidated Plan to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that sets out how they plan to spend certain federal funding streams. The Consolidated Plan includes a needs assessment and also incorporates something called a Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS).

While some Consolidated Plans and CHAS statements are well-done – and can be a valuable source of data and ideas to inform the development of a broader housing strategy – Consolidated Plans tend to be fairly narrow in scope and focused almost entirely on how the community will spend certain federal dollars. They thus do not generally address the zoning, planning, and tax policies needed to fully address a community's housing needs. They also do not generally reflect



Plaza East, San Francisco CA - Photo courtesy of McCormack Baron Salazar

the full range of programs developed with state and local funding. While a stakeholder input session is required as part of the development of Consolidated Plans, these plans are generally developed almost entirely by housing agency staff (or consultants to the housing agency), rather than by a broader constituency of stakeholders. Such plans thus generally lack the base of support that is developed through a broader task force process.

Most communities also have a document called a Comprehensive Plan which sets out their zoning and other land use policies. Roughly half of the states require the inclusion of a Housing Element within communities' Comprehensive Plans that explains how the expected demand for housing will be met. Some Housing Elements are very comprehensive and well thought-out. Others are more narrow or even perfunctory.

In some communities, the process of developing a Housing Element can serve as a foundation for developing a comprehensive housing strategy. In other communities, it may make more sense to separate the processes. In any event, there are certainly aspects of a community's housing strategy – particularly changes to allowable densities or other zoning policies – that will need to be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan, so ultimately the two processes will need to be coordinated.

As a condition for receiving funds for its homelessness programs, HUD requires the preparation and submission of a Continuum of Care plan, which is developed through broad stakeholder input and addresses many aspects of the homelessness challenge. While the Continuum of Care plan obviously addresses a very specific component of a community's housing challenges, the collaborative and comprehensive process used to develop and implement it may be worth examining as a model for the development of broader housing strategies.

One final plan that is worth reviewing as part of the process of developing a comprehensive housing strategy is the PHA Plan. This document summarizes the various discretionary policies of public housing agencies, who administer the Housing Choice Voucher and Public Housing programs. As with the Consolidated Plan, the PHA Plan is no substitute for a broader housing strategy, but in communities that have done a good job developing their PHA Plan, it can serve as an important source of information and data. Because public housing agencies are one of the agencies that should be involved in the process of developing a comprehensive housing strategy, a review of the PHA Plan can also be helpful in better understanding their programs and priorities.