



*Dedicated solely to ending America's
affordable housing crisis*

Statement of Sheila Crowley

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Today in the United States there are five million more extremely low income families than there are housing units that they afford to rent. This means that they must pay excessive portions of their income for their homes, forcing them to scrimp on other necessities like food, heat, and child care. Or the parents must work two or three jobs to make ends meet, leaving little time for family life and attention to the needs of their children. Or they fall prey to unscrupulous landlords who operate poor quality housing because they know poor people have no other choices. Or they live in overcrowded conditions, doubling and tripling up with friends and relatives. Some will become homeless when they have exhausted all other options.

This national crisis in the shortage of affordable rental housing has been exacerbated by the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from the Gulf Coast. The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that 302,000 housing units were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, 71% of which were affordable to low income households and 19% of which were rental housing units affordable to very low and extremely low income households.

Yet we have steady erosion in the federal commitment to solving the affordable housing shortage problem. Federal funds for low income housing are a fraction of what they were in the 1970s. In the last five years, low income housing advocates have had to defend against further attempts by the Bush Administration to cut basic housing assistance.

In 2000, the National Low Income Housing Coalition and our many partners, now totaling over 5,000 organizations across the country, launched a campaign to establish a National Housing Trust Fund that will provide funds to build or preserve 1.5 million units of rental housing affordable to extremely low income people over ten years. H.R. 1102, the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Act of 2003, in the 108th Congress, had 214 cosponsors, but House leadership refused to allow the bill to come up for consideration.

So when the bipartisan leadership of the House Financial Services Committee agreed to dedicate a portion of the profits of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to a fund to build and preserve rental housing for very low and extremely low income people in the context of strengthening regulation of Fannie and Freddie, we were elated.

That optimism was dampened somewhat at the mark-up of H.R. 1461 in May when several of the more conservative members of the Financial Services Committee spoke against the Affordable Housing Fund in the most vitriolic manner, charging that it would be used to support the advocacy activities of liberal groups. Nonetheless, the bill was voted out of committee by a vote of 65-5, a wonderful victory

for low income people in need of affordable housing. But opponents did not accept the will of the majority and succeeded in convincing the House leadership to keep the bill from coming to the floor unless their demands were met.

Financial Services Committee Chairman Mike Oxley (R-OH) offered several changes to the fund in an attempt to move the bill forward, but conservatives were not placated. Then Katrina hit and Mr. Oxley and Congressman Richard Baker (R-LA) proposed that the funds be directed to rebuilding in the Gulf Coast for the first two years. Still, this small band of conservatives rejected the bill until their draconian demands were met. We learned last week that the House leadership finally let them have their way.

Thus, we have the egregious legislation that would restrict the right of non-profit housing organizations to engage in any voter participation work with their residents if they want to use these funds to develop more housing. The restriction is not just on the use of Affordable Housing Fund grants, which we support. These funds are to be used solely for the capital costs of building housing. No, the restriction applies to all activities and funds of the organization. Thus something as simple as making voter registration forms available in the rental office would be prohibited.

As a social worker for 30 years and as a low income housing advocate for nearly that long, it breaks my heart that we have come to this point in the American democracy where in order for the lowest income people to have a chance to have safe, decent, and affordable housing, we have to choose between funds for housing and the most basic right in a democracy, the right to vote. The hypocrisy of sending young Marines and soldiers to fight and die for democracy in Iraq while attempting to reduce access to voting for their fellow citizens at home is breathtaking.

Thus we are here today with our colleagues to say no to this attempt to undermine voting by low income people, to say that the non-profit housing sector will not be forced into making this choice. We have sent a letter to House Speaker Dennis Hastert this morning signed by 59 national organizations objecting strenuously to these restrictions and asking that they be removed before the bill goes to the floor. This will not stand.