

Fair housing group's aim; Delaware Coalition has spent 25 years aiding citizens

By Kate House-Layton, *Delaware State News*, November 27, 2007

DOVER For nearly 25 years, the Delaware Housing Coalition has fought for fair and affordable housing.

The nonprofit advocacy group has promoted better housing standards, aided in the formation of community land trusts, appealed to the state legislature for more funds or attention to housing issues, and provides moral support to communities threatened with the danger of being swallowed by development.

The group also annually coordinates the state's Day for Housing in front of Legislative Hall. This year's rally in May helped maintain a \$12.5 million allocation to affordable housing.

"We've done a little bit of everything over 25 years," Executive director Ken Smith said.

Today, it has two full-time staff and a professional lobbyist at Legislative Hall.

"It's amazing the longevity through thick and thin, the need for this coalition," said board member Joe Myer, who helped found the organization and served as its first vice president. "I think it's at its strongest point ever."

Through grassroots efforts, the coalition continues to operate on the grounds on which it was founded "to give a voice to people who had housing problems and no way to articulate them, Mr. Myer said.

In 1983 various housing groups held public hearings in each county to find out the scope of housing problems in Delaware.

"In the early 1980s, it seemed like the majority of issues stemmed around substandard housing," he said of unsafe conditions, homes with dirt floors and no electricity. "Almost every community had its pocket of real horrible housing."

Nonprofit groups existed to improve housing conditions, but none had a mission of advocacy. The coalition grew from that need.

Substandard housing still exists in Delaware, but over the years, the coalition's chief focus has been on affordable housing.

"It's a never-ending battle trying to solve the housing problems that exist within the state," said board member Don Blair of Milford. "Centered around that is affordable housing. And the need for affordable housing has stretched to a wider population. When we used to talk about affordable housing we used to talk in terms of low-income people."

Now, he said, it has spread to middle-income residents such as teachers, firefighters and police officers.

The group lobbies bills in the legislature or comments on county ordinances attributed to housing, such as two bills related to manufactured housing.

Through its seat on the Governor's Task Force on Foreclosure, the coalition plays a role in solving

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Delaware's mortgage foreclosure crisis.

Housing variety is something the group also tries to keep in mind, as not everyone wants to own property, said Gina Miserendino, grassroots policy analyst for the group.

"We have to have housing that's available for everyone," Mr. Smith said.

Two of the group's publications, *The Housing Journal* and *Who Can afford to Live in Delaware?* tell of the state's achievements in housing, bring land rights and poverty issues to light and publishes the average housing costs in each county in the state.

Today, Ms. Miserendino and Mr. Smith have found that a person must earn at least \$16.31 per hour, or \$34,241, per year to afford fair market rent on a two-bedroom home in Delaware.

Seeing those statistics, Ms. Miserendino said, tends to confirm suspicions people have had about high housing costs in the state.

"The coalition really tries to put a face on the problem and bring home the issue of the ever increasing housing affordability problem," Mr. Myer said.

The group also has worked with community partners to make affordable housing a strong consideration in county comprehensive plans, Mr. Smith said.

One of the biggest things the group is working on is a National Affordable Housing Trust Fund that funnels money to states and counties to create affordable housing.

"It's probably the brightest and most creative light we have in affordable housing," Ms. Miserendino said.

Sandy Spence, one of the coalition's newer board members, also works with the Sussex County Habitat for Humanity.

"It was really important for us to partner with the coalition because they are the group for housing issues in the state," she said.

Since the development of a strategic plan last year, the group has become more focused on its aims.

"We have certainly been able to be more consistent in conveying the affordable housing message," Mr. Smith said.

"We're starting to do more assertive advocacy around budget and other legislation," he said of funds allocated for affordable housing.

Given resources and needs, Mr. Smith said the coalition likely will focus more on advocacy for a greater impact. The group also could get a little bigger and one day operate out of its own office rather than the National Council for Agriculture, Life and Labor Research on Saulsbury Road in Dover.

"But it's not as much a priority for us as being as effective as we possibly can as advocates," Mr. Smith said.