

Op-Ed: Prioritizing Affordable Housing

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The following op-ed column by Congressman Steve Rothman was published in the Bergen Record newspaper on January 4, 2007.

Let's make sure housing is affordable for all

By STEVE ROTHMAN

The lack of affordable housing has plagued New Jersey residents for far too long. In fact, affordable housing is out of reach for most Americans, especially those who live in the Northeast. As a result of soaring housing costs, it is estimated that there are only 30 to 40 affordable housing units available for every 100 low-income families in New Jersey. Nationwide, up to 70 percent of low-income families have no access to affordable housing.

This neglect must end. One of government's greatest responsibilities is to protect the people—especially the most vulnerable citizens. Yet, today the lack of affordable housing has left too many people who are elderly or disabled without any options. Even more shocking, able-bodied Americans who are working full-time jobs cannot afford a home. Elected officials—at the local, state, and federal levels—must prioritize housing assistance programs and increase funding for them.

Governor Jon Corzine recently called for the construction of 100,000 new affordable housing units in New Jersey. I endorse this proposal and intend to help keep the momentum going.

In the 110th Congress, I will introduce two critical affordable housing bills.

Funding shortfalls

Both bills seek to address the funding shortfalls faced by local housing authorities as a result of recent federal policies. Since the Great Depression, the federal government has created programs to improve the average American's access to affordable housing.

However, as is the case with so many vital social programs, our national investment in affordable housing has been inadequate over the past six years because of the misguided policies of President Bush and the Republican majority in Congress.

To reverse this trend, my first bill will create 150,000 new Section 8 housing vouchers. The need for more housing assistance vouchers is so dire that 75 percent of those who qualify for public housing assistance cannot receive Section 8 housing vouchers because of the lack of availability.

Nationwide, one-third of all recipients of Section 8 housing vouchers are either elderly or disabled. However, in New Jersey, the number is even higher—43 percent, which means that more than 23,000 low-income elderly or disabled New Jerseyans receive housing assistance. My proposal to increase the number of Section 8 housing vouchers is intended to help this vulnerable population find a decent place to call home.

Long-term solution

My second bill offers a long-term solution to the funding problems faced by local public housing authorities. Currently, the

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development distributes Section 8 voucher funding to local agencies based on a misguided formula that looks at the funding housing agencies needed during a specific three-month period in 2004. It then assumes that is the amount needed today.

This funding formula causes some housing authorities to receive more funding than necessary, while others—like many agencies in New Jersey—receive insufficient funds.

HUD's process for funding housing assistance programs forces thousands of families to wait years before finding a home. In Jersey City alone, the wait for a family in need of Section 8 housing assistance can be as long as 10 years.

My legislation will reform the current funding formula and ensure that federal Section 8 vouchers are distributed to local governments based on actual need.

A decent place to call home

The federal government, in partnership with local governments, must do everything possible to dedicate more resources to ensuring that Americans have a safe and decent place to call home.

I look forward to working within the new Democratic majority to advance the causes that matter most to the average American. Whether it's mandating a livable wage, ensuring the retirement security of our seniors, or, as in this case, providing affordable housing for our most vulnerable population, I will continue my work to ensure that every American can live in dignity.

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