

## **2003: The Year in Review**

In 2003 Texas Low Income Housing Information Service celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary! Fifteen years of assisting low-income community leaders to carry out their vision for community improvement, fifteen years of providing accurate, understandable information to low-income people in search of affordable housing, fifteen years of serving as a voice for accountability in housing programs. Though we have accomplished significant change during the organization's tenure, we also know that the fight for housing justice in Texas is far from over.

Today, there is not a single metropolitan area in Texas where a minimum wage earner can afford median market rent. Texas' meager public benefits and relatively expensive real estate market in the state's urban centers, combined with a low federal minimum wage, means that approximately 57% of extremely low-income renters in Texas spend more than half of their income on housing.<sup>1</sup> Though the state administers the HUD Section 8 program to provide subsidized rental assistance to these low-income renters, the resources available for Texas' Section 8 program are limited. Currently there are only 139,520 HUD Section 8 rental vouchers authorized in Texas, while roughly three times as many low-income renters are in need of the vouchers.<sup>2</sup>

In light of Texas' current lack of housing affordable to the poor, our work is as relevant as ever. The mission of TxLIHIS is to support low-income Texans effort to achieve the American Dream of a safe, decent, affordable home in a quality neighborhood. We believe that Texas' critical housing and community development needs can best be solved through a public/private partnership led by low-income Texans and supported by the government, the private sector and the general public. To this end, we address housing problems from numerous angles, working directly with low-income consumers, private developers, elected officials and others to achieve our goals. We recognize the strength in numbers, and we accept the responsibility to work with the various stakeholders to elevate affordable housing to a priority in Texas.

In 2003, we focused our energy on five program areas:

1. Support grassroots leaders to have an effective voice in housing policy and to carry out model self-help programs;
2. Educate low-income Texans on housing options and tenant rights;
3. Build a coalition to develop sound state and local housing policies;
4. Advocate adequate, effective programs for decent housing;
5. Increase TxLIHIS' organizational capacity.

Together, these five programs empower low-income Texans to address their basic needs, create systemic, sustainable solutions to Texas' affordable housing deficit and strengthen TxLIHIS' foundation to ensure the organization's longevity and continued success. We are proud of the work we have accomplished this year and are determined to achieve even greater success in our next fifteen years.

---

<sup>1</sup> Low Income Housing Plan and Annual Report, Texas Department of Housing & Community Affairs, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> <http://socds.huduser.org/scripts/odbic.exe/chas/area.htm>

**PROGRAM AREA ONE: Support grassroots leaders to have an effective voice in housing policy and to carry out model self-help programs.**

- A. This spring Austin's Fairway Village **Tenants Association** asked TxLIHIS for help at their HUD-subsidized apartments. We helped them document serious problems plaguing their buildings: raw sewage backups, consecutive days without electricity, heat or water, and recurring mildew inside the apartments. We organized tenants to educate elected officials about the neglect. TxLIHIS' technical understanding of the housing programs governing this property has been essential to this organizing effort. As a result of the pressure created by the Tenants Association and TxLIHIS, the apartment owner recently pledged to bring in a new manager, to set up a computer center for residents, and most importantly, to spend \$400,000 on repairs.
- B. TxLIHIS continues to support model community development organizations in South Texas **colonias**. One organization, Lower Valley Housing near El Paso, will complete its 900<sup>th</sup> self-help home this year. Lower Valley credits their success to TxLIHIS' work, begun a decade ago, to organize border residents to craft effective programs and to lobby state officials to adopt these programs. Next year, with start-up funding from the Marguerite Casey Foundation, TxLIHIS will launch a new, major effort to organize border residents to solve housing and community development problems on a larger scale.
- C. TxLIHIS continued to work with the Center for Community Change, the National Housing Law Project, and Texas **public housing** residents associations on trainings on Congressionally mandated opportunities for resident participation in housing authority management. As an outgrowth, one residents association in Fort Worth is developing a "Campaign to Empower the Poor." TxLIHIS helped this residents association successfully apply for 501c3 status, VISTA Volunteers, and a grant from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

**PROGRAM AREA TWO: Educate low-income Texans on housing options and tenant rights.**

- A. In 2003 we updated the **Texas Tenant Advisor**, a website that provides Texas tenants with information about their rights as tenants and a step-by-step guide to various actions tenants can undertake to address their housing problems. Working in partnership with Texas Rural Legal Aid (TRLA) and TRLA lawyer Robert Doggett, the website now includes dozens of videos featuring attorneys who provide expert advice for resolving landlord-tenant disputes. These videos help tenants with limited reading abilities ([www.texastenant.org](http://www.texastenant.org)).
- B. This year we received a grant to update the **Housing Counselor**, our on-line, interactive, searchable database for low-income Texans in need of affordable housing. The database allows individuals to search for housing in Texas based on the person's desired location, income, family size and access to government housing programs. More than 1,600 people consult this Web site each week, and with the grant we are updating the housing stock listed in the database to ensure it is current ([www.texashousingcounselor.org](http://www.texashousingcounselor.org)).

### **PROGRAM AREA THREE: Build a coalition to develop sound state and local housing policies.**

- A. In September, we facilitated the second annual meeting of the **Texas Housing Forum**, a coalition of housing stakeholders from throughout Texas who are committed to resolving the state's affordable housing crisis. Working under the premise that a broad group of Texans must work as a team to elevate affordable housing to a priority in Texas, the two-day meeting built upon progress made at last year's meeting. One increasingly active Forum Action Group is working with a major Texas advertising firm on an education campaign to inform the general public about the need to improve housing conditions in Texas.
- B. This fall we launched three **Housing Colloquia** designed to deepen participants' understanding of broad housing and community development problems. Divided into three groups of 20, the Colloquia bring together a range of participants, from housing professionals to low-income consumers, to debate the questions, and discover common ground, surrounding issues of housing, race, community and poverty. With a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Texas Council for the Humanities, the colloquia are currently occurring in Laredo, Austin, and Dallas, with each colloquia facilitated by a humanities professor. The Colloquia act as a sort of corollary to the Housing Forum, educating participants about the issues so that they can then return to the Housing Forum, where they will be better equipped to craft more informed policy recommendations and achieve greater consensus.

### **PROGRAM AREA FOUR: Advocate adequate, effective programs for decent housing.**

- A. In 2003, TxLIHIS witnessed the result of years of work to **reform the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA)**, the state agency responsible for administering the entirety of Texas' housing programs and a portion of the state's community development programs. Much to the agency's credit, TDHCA achieved remarkable changes and huge improvements over the last few years, transforming the agency from an inefficient, troubled beauracracy to a national model. TDHCA's dramatic improvements were highlighted by the fact that in 2003, the state allocated more than \$61 million to programs that serve Texas' extremely low-income population, representing a ten-fold increase in funding for Texas' neediest families.
- B. **78<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session:** During Texas' 2003 Legislative Session TxLIHIS worked to protect funding for low-income housing programs. TxLIHIS' major legislative accomplishments include:
  - Provided information that inspired legislators to preserve recent structural reforms that improved the administration of state housing programs with regards to support for low-income programs;

- Provided information that inspired legislators to develop and pass compromise legislation to counter attempts to block affordable housing developments in suburban neighborhoods;
- Provided information that inspired legislators to block proposed legislation that would have reduced the current emphasis on serving extremely low-income families in state housing programs;
- Provided information that inspired legislators to secure \$30 million, over the next ten years, for the Texas Bootstrap Housing Loan Program to build affordable housing in the colonias.

### **PROGRAM AREA FIVE: Increase TxLIHIS' organizational capacity.**

With funding from the Houston Endowment for development work, we hired Loren Berlin as **Development Director / Coordinator of Special Projects**. Having a development person on staff enabled us to carry out a very successful fundraiser called the **Houser Rouser**. This event commemorated TxLIHIS' first fifteen years of accomplishments in affordable housing and raised money to fund future work. In recognition of our work for low-income Texans in need of safe, decent, affordable housing, Grammy Award winning musicians Marcia Ball and Floyd Domino performed an evening of Western swing. The Houser Rouser was a tremendous success, with an attendance of over 300 people and a net revenue that exceeded the previous year's fundraising event's net revenue by 37%.

## **2004: Looking Ahead**

2004 promises to be an exciting year! Building on 2003's successes, we have selected three policy areas that we believe present the greatest potential for large-scale positive change among the many housing and community development challenges facing Texas. Thus, in 2004, we will dedicate a significant portion of our resources and energies towards pursuing the following objectives. We will integrate these specific policy areas into TxLIHIS' larger organizing, advocacy, information dissemination and leadership training activities.

### ***Objective A: Work toward equitable use of housing and community development funds.***

Currently Dr. Elizabeth Mueller, a TxLIHIS board member and research fellow at the University of Texas at Austin, is creating housing and community development expenditure report cards to "grade" local governments' allotment of their federal housing dollars with regards to the housing needs of low-income communities. Her projects will give community leaders quick-to-use tools for explaining gaps between needs and local housing and community development spending. We will work with Dr. Mueller to link her research with local community leaders in three major Texas cities. We will help local leaders to both inform her research on the front end and use her research, once it is complete, to influence local policy-makers. Because there are 26 metropolitan entities in Texas developing and administering their own unique housing policies, such research could profoundly impact local and regional preferences for affordable housing.

### ***Objective B: Assist public housing residents to reform public housing.***

Public housing in Texas is suffering. Thousands of units of subsidized housing in San Antonio, Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth have been demolished as downtowns are revitalized while many more privately owned, subsidized apartments have been converted into market rate units or nonresidential buildings. At the same time, housing authorities in several Texas cities are being buffeted by problems of misadministration, allowing residents' living conditions to deteriorate. To address these problems we will train public housing leaders in three major Texas cities, assist these leaders to organize within their communities, develop an action plan, build bridges of support with other community organizations and elected leaders, seek effective representation on public housing authority governing boards and reform the policies that govern public housing.

### ***Objective C: Reactivate Border Low Income Housing Coalition.***

In 2004 we will revive the Border Low Income Housing Coalition (BLIHC), a group of 350 Border residents, housing providers, advocates, government officials and lenders who first came together in 1993 to address the Border's housing and economic development problems. With a two-fold goal of channeling more resources to the area and empowering residents to advocate for their needs, BLIHC has achieved tremendous success since its inception, including support for three of the nation's most visible, aggressive and successful self-help housing organizations and increasing state funding for Border initiatives by more than \$30 million over the last seven years. Today, in light of the facts that Texas' poorest families reside in the Border region and that the region is growing alarmingly quickly, it is time to reevaluate the Border's housing situation and determine the next steps necessary to improve availability of housing in the area.

## GRANT SUPPORT AND DONATIONS

Texas Low Income Housing Information Service is a private, nonprofit organization that supports low-income Texans' efforts to achieve the American Dream of a safe, decent, affordable home in a quality neighborhood. We serve as a voice for accountability in government programs and provide accurate, understandable information to consumers, policy-makers and the general public. To ensure our independence we do not accept any contributions that create a conflict of interest, or the appearance of a conflict of interest, or in any way detract from our mission.

In 2003, grant support for Texas Low Income Housing Information Service came from:

- Foundation for Expanding Horizons
- The Houston Endowment, Inc.
- Lola Wright Foundation
- Marguerite Casey Foundation
- Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock
- Shield-Ayres Foundation
- Texas Council for the Humanities
- Another Way Texas Shares
- The Rockefeller Foundation

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**Standish Meacham**, PhD, *Chair*  
Professor Emeritus,  
University of Texas, Austin

The Law School,  
University of Texas at Austin

**Veon McReynolds**, PhD, *Vice Chair*  
Texas Southern University,  
Houston

**John Fullenwider**  
Teacher and Housing Advocate,  
Dallas

**Janne Briesemeister**, *Secretary*  
Consumers Union, Austin

**Lenwood Johnson**  
Allen Parkway Village Residents  
Council, Houston

**Elizabeth Mueller**, PhD, *Treasurer*  
University of Texas, Austin

**Mary Sanger**  
Environmental Defense, Austin

**Wardaleen Belvin**  
Sherry Matthews Advocacy  
Marketing, Austin

**Rafael I. Torres**  
Azteca Economic Development  
and Preservation Corporation, Laredo

**Harryette Ehrhardt**, PhD  
Educator and Retired Legislator, Dallas

**Wendy Watriss**  
FotoFest, Houston

**Willian Forbath**, PhD

**STAFF**

**John Henneberger**  
Co-Director

**Karen Paup**  
Co-Director

**Loren Berlin**  
Special Projects/Development

**Wanda Hood**  
Administrator