

HOUSING IS ESSENTIAL

A Commonsense Paradigm Shift to Solve the Urban Displacement and Racial Injustice Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses one of the biggest tests of our society: the urban displacement and racial injustice crisis. Today's urban displacement crisis has reached a social change tipping point, but most solutions being advanced fail to prevent immediate displacement. This article debunks the prevailing strategies focused on building more market rate or affordable housing units as being able to effectively prevent displacement. It examines the impacts of urban displacement on the collective self-interest to advance climate change and racial equity. Lastly, the article provides an alternative vision for a paradigm shift based upon an understanding that housing is essential to public goods like clean air, clean water, and K-12 education. California and Oakland, California are used as case studies since they are the epicenter of the national housing unaffordability crisis and because of the authors' work as policy change practitioners designing and implementing anti-displacement solutions in these communities.

The flag is in the mud claiming territories and families
The flag is in the mud, barreling out of control
What is the square root of racism
How do you quantify and qualify the communities you're destroying
Where's our conscience on a google map
How many likes does decency have
What side of history do we stand on as a people and industry
What will be the spark?
(Lyfe 2016)

We are confronted with a major test for our society. Advancements in race relations, public education, access to good jobs, healthy neighborhoods, and the environment are being eroded because of the displacement crisis in urban centers. This is about the future of our cities and who gets to live, work, and thrive there. People from all walks of life, from activists and academics to politicians and hip hop artists, are talking about the urban displacement crisis; yet, *few significant* solutions are actually being advanced.

We posit three main points: 1) there is collective self-interest in solving the displacement crisis; 2) the prevalent "build more" strategy does not sufficiently address the housing crisis, which requires specific anti-displacement measures; and 3) it is time for a paradigm shift based upon an understanding that housing is an essential public good like clean air and water or K-12 education. We focus on California and Oakland. Case studies found in California were selected because they are at the epicenter of the national housing unaffordability crisis. Additionally, they align with our work as policy change practitioners in these communities and goals to design and implement anti-displacement solutions.

URBAN DISPLACEMENT—MORE THAN JUST HOUSING

Displacement is both part of and different from the current overall housing crisis. It is not just that too many individuals are paying too much for housing or can't afford housing. Rather, urban displacement today is about the structural exclusion and involuntary departure of lower-income, predominantly people of color, from new centers of employment and quality of life advancements. It is ultimately about the unjust and radical transformation of our cities. It is also about the public interest (e.g., environmental, educational, and health impacts) of lower-income residents who have to move far away from employment centers.

First, displacement is destroying the soul of our cities. Whole communities are being forced out. Indispensable city workers cannot afford to live in the city or even nearby. Teachers, nurses, service workers, artists, or even the children of urban professionals cannot live in the cities in which they work or grew up in. Given historical and persistent racial discrimination in employment, financial stability, as well as the housing market, people of color have been the most impacted by urban displacement. How we care about and engage in solving the displacement crisis is a direct measure of our commitment to right the wrongs of our nation's history of racism and racial exclusion.

Decades ago, in cities like San Francisco and Oakland, there was government sponsored displacement. It was called *Urban Renewal* (or *Redevelopment*) or freeway construction. These government programs demolished neighborhoods and separated communities. The literature is replete with accounts of the disastrous impacts of these programs. John Powell writes that for many years America's cities and their residents were ignored, neglected, and discriminated against. Federal lending discrimination, bank redlining, housing covenants and forced segregation from the 1930s to the 60s created today's concentration of poverty in certain neighborhoods and a lack of financial equity in these communities. White flight and ensuing public and private divestments occurred from the 1950s to 90s. The crack epidemic and mass incarceration policies of the 1980s and 90s further imprisoned a whole generation (Powell and Cardwell 2013). Despite all these challenges, many people stayed in the cities and worked hard to improve their neighborhoods and communities.

Now, the apparently non-governmental "market" is taking up where these deliberate and identifiable public programs left off. Today's reality is an absence of major policy efforts. In effect, our cities will become predominantly higher income and less diverse. As urban equity researcher Malo Hutson shows, today there is a reversal of white flight and a new era of re-segregation in major metropolitan areas with strong housing markets like the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Brooklyn, and Washington DC (Hutson 2016). Communities of color are bearing the brunt of the crisis. In San Francisco's Mission District, Latinos are being forced out. In Berkeley and San Francisco, previously vibrant African American communities are now in single digits. In Oakland, the African American population dropped from 47% in 1980 to 28% in 2010, and this decline is accelerating.¹

Granted, there are many reasons why people move from cities, including a search for safer communities, better schools, and bigger homes. Students of urban history understand that communities change over time. However, the branding of cities as cool, hip, diverse places, smart growth living, and the explosion of the tech economy have resulted in higher-income residents moving in and driving up housing costs. This in turn results in the involuntary push out of lower-income, predominantly people of color, expelling much of what makes cities cool and hip in the first place. The involuntary displacement is occurring at a time when these cities have experienced new economic growth and jobs, improvements in public education and safety, and population expansion of Whites and other ethnic groups (Lin and Rose 2015, 10).

The economic and housing markets are exacerbating, rather than alleviating, the housing crisis for lower-income families. Rents and home costs are increasing because of the new pressure placed on housing markets, which is caused by the influx of new jobs and new people taking those jobs.

1. For example, in Oakland in the early 2000s, the city had a public policy goal of bringing 10,000 new people to live in Oakland's downtown area through building market rate housing and accompanying amenities. The focus on attracting higher-income people and the failure to pass proactive policy anti-displacement protections have resulted in severe consequences for today's residents. In addition, Oakland's foreclosure crisis, with its predatory lending activities targeting people of color, led to the loss of over 11,000 homes from 2007 to 2013, concentrated in working class flatland neighborhoods that were once the bastion of African American homeownership. Private speculators swooped in and purchased over 90% of these properties in certain neighborhoods, instantly destabilizing whole neighborhoods, since single-family homes are unprotected by rent control under state law (Lin and Rose 2015, 44). African American elderly homeowners disproportionately face high housing cost burdens, making them the most at risk of losing their homes.

While jobs are flowing into Bay Area urban centers, this unprecedented growth is lopsided (Beacon Economics 2014). The high-growth, well-paying jobs in tech and related professions are not accessible to many long-time residents of color, for reasons including persistent racial discrimination.² The other growing area of jobs, the service industry, does not pay enough for people to afford new market rate rents.

Second, health impacts compound the racial component of displacement. The Center for Disease Control (2013) recently documented the health impacts of displacement:

Bonnie Spindler may have Ellised 19 units of her own, but she has participated in Ellising hundreds more as a real estate agent at Zephyr. As an example, we were Ellised when she was hired as the agent to sell the building we lived in. She arranged for the fractional financing, sold each condo, and when one unit wouldn't sell because it was not optimal for an owner to live in, she even got her friend and "stager" to purchase the unit and then rent it out exactly two years after the eviction for four times what it was renting for before. She knows the Ellis Act inside out and profits on more than just her 19 units.

Third, displacement has also been shown to hurt educational outcomes. Improving public education for all children is a ticket out of poverty. Yet, housing instability for families of school-aged children has been shown to significantly affect educational performance and learning (Housing and Urban Development 2014), which exacerbates existing racial disparities in education (Sablich 2016).

Lastly, we are all affected by urban displacement because of climate change. *Smart growth* has provided the rationale for moving back to, and increasing the density in, cities. Decades of urban planning initiatives and focused advancements in housing, transportation, economic development, environmental, and cultural entertainment infrastructures in major cities have resulted in the planned for outcomes of people flocking to those cities, rather than to suburbs.³ For people who can afford city housing costs, smart

2. I.e., <http://money.cnn.com/2017/01/18/technology/oracle-lawsuit-labor-department/index.html>.

3. A recent report from Urban Habitat (2016) found that while there were significant declines of African American and Latino residents in Bay Area cities from 2000 to 2014, there were significant increases in the African American and Latino populations in outer suburbs. The report also found that poverty disproportionately increased in outer suburb neighborhoods that are ill-equipped with sufficient services and resources to serve these newer residents (Samara 2016).

growth has positive impacts. But, urban displacement and the push-out of lower-income people to more affordable outer suburbs just replaces one group of suburbanites with another. This further increases air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and the clearing of green spaces (Johnson 2001, 717–735; Stone 2006, 689).

Solutions require visionary, bold, and effective government intervention.

THE PERVASIVE BUILD MORE MODEL IS INSUFFICIENT TO SOLVE THE URBAN DISPLACEMENT CRISIS

Despite what we know about the displacement crisis, the commonly profffered solution by policymakers focuses on building more housing. Building new housing, both market rate and "affordable," will help address part of the housing crisis, but it is insufficient to address displacement. Specific anti-displacement actions are necessary.

Why can't we build our way out of the displacement crisis?

First, many of the key displacement issues have little to do with building additional housing. In cities like Oakland, long-time, lower-income homeowners risk losing their homes due to the gap between their incomes and basic housing and living costs. This is reflected in mortgage foreclosures, predatory lending, property tax defaults, and severe habitability problems (Lin 2016). Tenants are being legally or constructively evicted due to increasing rents, habitability problems, condo conversions, owner-occupancy conversions, and landlord harassment or retaliation (Lin and Rose 2015). Rent control ensures affordable rent levels for a small percentage of rental units.⁴ In addition, artists, nonprofits, and small business employers are being dislocated due to rising rents and the absence of protections for commercial properties. Had there already been a much larger inventory of affordable units, the pressure on the housing market would have been reduced. But, building more housing today in the quantities and speed that are technically, commercially, and politically feasible to produce will be far too little and far too late.

4. Under the Costa-Hawkins California state law, units constructed after the 1980s and single family houses are exempt from rent control. More importantly, Costa-Hawkins allows for "vacancy decontrol," giving landlords the right to immediately raise rents to market levels as soon as units become vacant. This gives landlords an enormous incentive to remove existing tenants.

Second, market rate units are not affordable to the people being displaced. Most families being displaced cannot afford anything close to even the building cost of new units. While new units might help alleviate the regional housing crisis for new, higher-income people (e.g., tech migrants), they will do little to alleviate housing pressures for current, long-time residents. Rather than addressing housing issues for current residents, building more market rate units will mostly serve the housing needs of new higher-income in-migrants from the region. For example, renters in Oakland making the median household income would have to pay almost 100% of their rents to afford the new market rate; Berkeley renters would have to pay 114%; and renters across Alameda County would have to pay 72% (Lin 2016, 13).⁵

Third, the displacement crisis is time urgent. It takes decades to build sufficient numbers of housing units. By the time substantial new units are constructed, far too many communities will already have been pushed out.

5. See below for table of the median household income in different cities in Alameda County compared to the median market rents.

CURRENT MARKET-RATE RENT AFFORDABILITY FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY RENTERS

CITY	2014 MEDIAN RENT	2016 MEDIAN RENT	% RENT INCREASE	MEDIAN RENTER HH INCOME	% INCOME TOWARD MARKET RENT
ALAMEDA	\$2,298	\$3,385	47%	\$52,617	77%
ALBANY	\$2,343	\$3,455	47%	\$52,500	79%
BERKELEY	\$2,539	\$3,653	44%	\$38,539	114%
CASTRO VALLEY	\$2,170	\$2,971	37%	\$50,430	71%
DUBLIN	\$2,158	\$3,147	46%	\$91,343	41%
EMERYVILLE	\$1,555	\$2,575	66%	\$63,080	49%
FREMONT	\$2,163	\$3,123	44%	\$76,655	49%
HAYWARD	\$1,755	\$2,544	45%	\$44,064	69%
LIVERMORE	\$2,119	\$2,926	38%	\$55,403	63%
NEWARK	\$2,009	\$2,854	42%	\$59,269	58%
OAKLAND	\$1,838	\$2,835	54%	\$36,657	93%
PIEDMONT	\$4,538	\$6,711	48%	\$74,861	108%
PLEASANTON	\$2,509	\$3,524	40%	\$74,151	57%
SAN LEANDRO	\$1,815	\$2,518	39%	\$47,090	64%
SAN LORENZO	\$1,746	\$2,524	45%	\$57,522	53%
UNION CITY	\$2,082	\$2,941	41%	\$54,871	64%
COUNTY TOTAL	\$2,400	\$3,385	17%	\$46,851	72%

Source: Zillow, ACS five-year sample.

Even with vast new funding resources, numerous new contractors, and little political opposition, there are major obstacles to building large quantities of new units. It is difficult to imagine the construction of even 1,000 new units per year in a city like Oakland. At the heart of the construction boom prior to the Great Recession, Mayor Brown put forth a 10K proposal to build 6,000 new units and bring in 10,000 new people. Ultimately, 3,000 units were produced over an eight-year period. This works out to some 500 units per year. According to the most recent *City of Oakland Housing Element 2015–2023*, Oakland’s “Fair Share” Housing Goals are 14,765 units over the next eight years or almost 2,000 units per year (i.e., four times the unit construction rate of Mayor Brown’s 10K initiative during the boom years).

Fourth, construction costs in places like the Bay Area are too expensive to support the building of sufficient affordable housing units.⁶ In the Bay Area, it currently costs about \$400,000 to \$500,000 to build one housing unit, whether market rate or affordable. The local public subsidy created for leveraging affordable rental housing construction is about \$100,000 per unit or \$1 billion per 10,000 subsidized units. However, even this assumes that there are resources (e.g., sufficient Low-Income Housing Tax Credits) to leverage this \$100,000 per unit subsidy.⁷

Fifth, the supply/demand idea that producing more market rate housing will lead to price reductions misunderstands basic price/demand theory. Suppliers will supply goods (housing units) as long as marginal revenue exceeds marginal cost. Most housing models, including nexus studies in both Berkeley and Oakland, indicate that projects only “pencil out” at high or even higher rent levels.⁸ If an increased supply eventually leads to rent level decline, developers will stop building, abandon the market, and additional units will not be constructed.

Sixth, even assuming developers continue to develop, there is little prospect that new units will significantly lower the overall level of housing prices.

6. See Terner Housing Center Dashboard calculator at <http://ternercenter2.berkeley.edu/proforma/> for estimated interrelationships between construction costs, developer fees, rent levels, etc.

7. There is current concern that the Low-Income Tax Credit (LITC) market may be adversely affected by new federal proposals to lower marginal tax rates, particularly corporate rates (i.e., as marginal rates decrease, the investment value of the LITC also decreases).

8. (Vernazza Wolfe Associates 2016; <http://www2.oaklandnet.com/oakca1/groups/ceda/documents/report/oak057583.pdf>)

The “filtering,” argument that construction of market-rate units will eventually become affordable for lower-income people (Bier 2001) is unlikely in strong housing markets. It is theorized that as new units age, they lose value and enter the housing market for lower-income households. However, filtering takes many years and does not work at all in gentrifying neighborhoods because land values and rents rise as the neighborhoods become more desirable and developers bid up prices. While building new units might reduce the competition between higher- and lower-income people for more affordable housing in markets that are not as tight as those in the San Francisco Bay Area, it is unlikely to be a solution to the problem of affordability and displacement in California’s hot housing markets.

Instead, as described below in the *Oakland Housing Action Plan* case study, we need to advance comprehensive anti-displacement policy solutions quickly and boldly, in addition to building more housing. Immediately addressing displacement requires specific strategies to protect lower-income tenants and homeowners from losing their homes, such as enacting effective rent control and condo conversion policies. It also requires investment in low-cost and evidence-based solutions like safety net services for legal eviction defense, housing counseling, and emergency housing assistance. If we do not invest heavily in urgent anti-displacement efforts, by the time large quantities of new and affordable housing are built, the struggle to preserve long-time urban communities will have been lost.

WE LOOK TO CALIFORNIA FOR A NEW ANTI-DISPLACEMENT PARADIGM BASED UPON COMMONSENSE PRINCIPLES: HOUSING IS ESSENTIAL

It is highly unlikely that the federal government today will be advancing solutions for people who are the “losers” from private market operations, much less a completely new paradigm shift to address unmet housing needs. However, we believe that state and local governments have an opportunity to be bold, visionary, and impactful. We, therefore, focus our attention on how a new paradigm that positions housing as an indispensable public necessity like clean water and air or K-12 education—a *Housing is Essential* paradigm—rather than as a competitive commodity with an inevitable set of winners and losers could be implemented in California by state and local governments. We recognize that what we offer below is predicated upon the

work of state and local officials who really care about solving the housing and displacement crisis. Solving the displacement crisis involves short-term strategies as well as longer-term structural policy and financing solutions that will require the power of a movement similar to the movements for Social Security and Medicare. Given the urgency of California’s displacement crisis, our recommended policy changes utilize *existing* state and local systems.

Recognizing that the availability of housing is of statewide importance, since 1969 the State of California has required each city and county to adopt a *Housing Element*, which is updated every five to eight years. The *Housing Element* is based on the principles of planning and zoning and requires local governments, in theory, to make plans to meet their existing and projected housing needs, including their fair share of the *Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA)*. However, the State’s current compliance action, with the teeth of state and regional transportation funds, is focused on recalcitrant cities that do not make a good faith attempt to identify how their *RHNA* goals will be met, especially through zoning for sufficient housing (Lewis 2003). Most local governments do not build housing and instead serve as a housing funder and regulator of development plans and permits. This being the case, there are currently no consequences for cities that do not implement the essential strategies identified in their *Housing Element*’s production goals. In addition, the *RHNA* goals do not take into account the private units lost through market rent escalation, nor people’s current needs for affordable housing.

Through our practical work in Oakland, we believe that the *Housing Element* could be modernized to be a more effective tool for addressing the housing crisis, which would require changes to state law. Under a *Housing is Essential* paradigm, *the following five changes in State law would need to occur*.

First, the State would need to amend the *Housing Element* to include a local “Housing Action Plan” that identifies the major housing problems, has clear measurable outcomes, and is action-oriented, publicly accessible, and enforceable. The “Housing Action Plan” would include local government actions to address a local community’s housing priorities, such as enacting impact fees to increase funds for affordable housing production or rent stabilization policies to prevent displacement. The state mandated template for the *Housing Element* makes it challenging for most residents to effectively understand or use it to organize change. For example, the

City of Oakland Housing Element for 2015–2023 is 600 pages long and lists 46 different policy goals with over 130 action steps—an overwhelming and unfocused document for mere mortals. Most local government policy-makers only talk or think about the Housing Element when it’s time to renew it, rather than integrating it as part of their ongoing policy-making agenda. That is why in Oakland, a housing action plan, the Oakland Housing Equity Roadmap, was developed as a complement to the city’s Housing Element. The Roadmap is described below in the Oakland case study.

Second, in the development of a new “Housing Action Plan,” local governments would need to transform the community process from community “input” to authentic participation. The traditional government community engagement process is rooted in the paternalistic model of “government knows best.” In community forums, professional staff inform residents of city plans, which residents’ input is unlikely to substantially change. Instead, local governments could utilize an empowerment model in the creation of the “Housing Action Plans,” where residents’ voices actually define and determine city action (Barnes and Schmitz 2016). A process to create community ownership over the plan would help ensure the active engagement of residents in the implementation of the plan. This is key to breaking the inertia of the government’s status quo.

Third, State law would need to change to provide a baseline guarantee of state funding for localities to implement their “Housing Action Plans.” Under a *Housing is Essential* paradigm, financing for affordable housing could follow the public financing for public schools model where a baseline of per-pupil spending exists. Local governments are currently on their own to find the resources needed to meet their *RHNA* goals. In fact, California’s Governor Jerry Brown dismantled state redevelopment in 2011 and thereby deprived localities of the funding resources they needed for affordable housing development.⁹ While there is pending state legislation that would create more funds for affordable housing,¹⁰ California ultimately needs

9. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2012/09/19/redevelopment-in-california-the-program-that-disappeared>

For example, under the state redevelopment financing system, Oakland received about \$20 million annually for affordable housing development. Today, Oakland receives about \$5 million from the state-replaced financing system for affordable housing development, or one-fourth of its prior funds (Lin and Rose 2015, 26).

10. Examples of pending state legislation to dedicate new funding streams for affordable housing development include SB 3, a \$3 billion low-income housing bond; SB 2, a \$75 fee for real estate transactions estimated to add \$250 million per year for affordable housing; AB 71, ending the state’s mortgage interest deduction on second homes and providing about \$300 million per year for affordable housing.

to provide vast new resources for both anti-displacement and affordable housing efforts. Reforming Proposition 13 could provide some resources for such an effort, assuming these new funds are allocated towards anti-displacement initiatives and the construction of affordable housing.

Fourth, complementing new state financing for affordable housing, state law would also need to change in order for the state to hold local governments accountable when failing to implement their locally developed solutions to local housing crises. State legislators have proposed legislation to address local noncompliance with *RHNA* goals.¹¹ State action could range from incentives such as providing preference points in competitive state infrastructure grants for local governments that are actively meeting their “Housing Action Plans” to enforcement action in the form of withholding state funds. In addition, new state law could take a page from education civil rights models that enable private citizens to file complaints with the state, rather than through the current system of costly and burdensome litigation.

Lastly, yet extremely critical, meaningful state solutions to California’s housing crisis would require the enactment of state laws that protect vulnerable people from eviction and displacement. At the very least, this would require the repeal of the Costa-Hawkins Act, enacted to prevent local governments from implementing effective rent protections. While long seen as touching the third rail of California politics by moderate Democrats, this year a trio of bold progressive state leaders have introduced such legislation, AB 1560. The state could also pass a statewide just cause evictions law, a commonsense approach to preventing discriminatory or abusive evictions. In addition, the state should prioritize financing low-cost, but extremely effective, strategies to prevent displacement and homelessness, such as legal assistance for low-income tenants and homeowners and emergency housing assistance for those suffering from a temporary loss of income.

A fundamental shift in how government and people think about housing may naturally result in private or other sector changes. For example, there is a movement among health leaders to advance healthcare resour-

11. Examples of pending state legislation to address local government compliance with their *Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA)* goals include: 1) SB 35, which would require cities that are failing to meet their *RHNA* goals to streamline the approval process for housing projects that meet their housing obligations, including market rate projects; and 2) AB 1350, which would require local governments that have not met one-third of their *RHNA* goals to pay a penalty to be deposited in a *RHNA* Compliance Fund for projects in cities that are compliant.

es for housing funds. This movement views stable housing as a “vaccine” to improve health.¹² Employers like Facebook, with its recent, yet limited, \$20 million contribution to affordable housing, are also beginning to understand their self-interest in addressing the housing crisis. Under a *Housing is Essential* paradigm, employers with financial means would participate in funding housing for their workforce, either through developing housing for their employees or paying their workers enough to afford market rate housing.¹³

THE BITTERSWEET OAKLAND CASE STUDY: A MODEL LOCAL “HOUSING ACTION PLAN” AND LIMITATIONS OF LOCAL POLITICS

We look to the Oakland example for both what a local “Housing Action Plan” in the *Housing Element* could look like, as well as to assess why a new state accountability framework is critical to advancing the public good. Oakland serves as a cautionary tale for other cities that are in the earlier throes of housing market displacement trends. Once the epitome of a working class city with a plurality African American population after *white flight*, Oakland was “discovered” in the beginning of the 21st century. Its great weather, proximity to San Francisco and Silicon Valley, and cultural diversity quickly made Oakland one of the “hottest” cities in the nation.¹⁴ The unleashing of the tech economy tsunami turned Oakland, almost overnight, into the city with the fourth highest rents in the nation.¹⁵ This quarter, the median rent in Oakland approaches \$3,000, a 54% increase in just two

12. Results from these efforts include health insurer UnitedHealth Group investing in low-income housing in several states and New York State using Medicaid dollars to develop or renovate subsidized housing (Doran et al. 2013).

13. Alternatively, employers can contribute to the building of new housing units through vehicles like a robust commercial/housing linkage fee or building affordable housing for lower-income residents. A short-term local remedy could be to set commercial linkage fees at a level commensurate with building costs, especially through working in collaboration with other cities in the region to avoid developers from jurisdiction shopping for their projects.

14. <http://techcrunch.com/2016/12/02/facebook-invests-20m-to-catalyze-affordable-housing-development-in-menlo-park/>

15. <http://blog.sfgate.com/ontheblock/2015/12/21/oakland-ascends-to-nations-4th-most-expensive-rental-market/>

years.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the median household income for renters is only \$36,000. Oakland’s African American population, heaviest hit by displacement, has declined by over 36,000 people since 2000, a change from 140,139 people to 106,637. (Lin 2016).

In areas of substantial gentrification and over-heated housing markets like Oakland, displacement is exacerbated by illegal rent increases and evictions and foreclosures. Few affected people know their rights or their ability to fight the actions of landlords and institutions. *Preventing displacement requires strategies beyond just building more affordable housing units.* The Oakland story highlights specific local anti-displacement strategies and the challenges of implementing those strategies without an outside accountability system.

Working with a city inter-departmental team and community groups, the City of Oakland created a model for utilizing the *Housing Element* as an anti-displacement tool in the *City of Oakland Housing Element for 2015–2023*. Oakland’s Housing Element referenced a specific, quantifiable, and separate *Housing Action Plan, A Roadmap Toward Equity: Housing Solutions for Oakland, California*. This occurred in 2014 just as the housing market and attendant displacement impacts were heating up (Lin and Rose 2015). This roadmap identified the main displacement forces occurring in Oakland, strategies that could effectively address Oakland’s problems based on best practice research and an evaluation of scale, and specific implementation requirements and their key actors. The roadmap’s authors also consulted with stakeholder groups on both sides of a potential policy. The Oakland City Council adopted the roadmap as a policy framework in September 2015.¹⁷

The Roadmap identified eight anti-displacement strategies that included both policy changes and the funding of priority programs that would prevent the displacement of over 40,000 households. Fixing rent stabilization law to be proactive, fixing a major loophole in a condo conversion law, proactively

16. Zillow estimate of median rents. <https://www.zillow.com/research/data/-rental-data>

17. The Oakland Housing Equity Roadmap also provided a chart that summarized key points helpful for public accountability and city implementation, including the following: 1) risk of inaction, such as the loss of 14,000 un-retrofitted rental units in an earthquake; 2) which city departments and community stakeholder groups would be involved in policy deliberations; 3) how much it would take to achieve specific outcomes; and 4) which city official was spearheading the specific change effort (Lin and Rose 2015, 43–46).

addressing habitability problems including seismic retrofitting, increasing protections for distressed homeowners, and developing home preservation and rapid re-housing funds were among the strategies listed.

The roadmap also identified nine new strategies to meet its *RHNA* goals of building at least 7,000 new affordable housing units over the next 7 years. These strategies included a housing bond, a housing impact fee, a second unit local ordinance, removing city liens on vacant lots for affordable housing re-use, and public lands for affordable housing policy. Lastly, the roadmap identified strategies to address housing habitability in ways that would not result in the displacement of existing tenants (Lin and Rose 2015).

The *Oakland Housing Equity Roadmap* provided a set of best practices for local “Housing Action Plans” with buy-in from key political, bureaucratic, and community stakeholders. It demonstrated comprehensive strategies, specific outcomes, and implementation activities and roles. Indeed, it has been used by other cities like Seattle and Berkeley in developing their housing action plans.

Two years since the Roadmap’s adoption, where is Oakland in terms of implementing roadmap strategies and benefits for residents suffering from the housing crisis?

On the positive side, the city has largely implemented the affordable housing development strategies identified in the roadmap, which are altogether anticipated to provide an unprecedented \$200–250 million in the next five years. This will facilitate the production of about 2,500 new affordable housing units.¹⁸ The major driver of these efforts has been the new mayor’s focus on new development strategies to address Oakland’s housing crisis, including both market rate and affordable housing. The mayor’s Housing Cabinet is comprised mainly of market rate and affordable housing development representatives.

Less hopeful are Oakland’s efforts to enact immediate anti-displacement strategies. The only major accomplishment so far has been a grassroots ballot measure campaign to fix the city’s rent stabilization law, which

sparked long overdue action by the City Council.¹⁹ Without additional protective anti-displacement regulations, an estimated 33,000+ rental units are potentially at risk of being lost to condo conversions (29,000 units) or an estimated 14,000 units to a major earthquake (Lin, Rose 2015, 17–19). The housing needs of families who live in these units cannot be sufficiently addressed through the production of 2,500 new affordable units.

Most strikingly, Oakland’s lack of progress in preventing displacement of its lower-income residents has contributed to the surge in its homeless population, which has increased by 39% in two years (EveryOne Home 2017). The new homeless population includes the working poor who are homeless not because of mental health or substance abuse problems, but because they are unable to afford escalating housing costs.

A recent experience showcases why a state accountability framework is critical to protecting residents at risk of displacement and homelessness. In response to the growing displacement and new homeless epidemic, anti-displacement leaders formed a community effort called Our Beloved Community Action Network to develop program and policy solutions, including anti-displacement safety net strategies identified in the *Oakland Housing Equity Roadmap*. Given the infusion of a new \$580 million County Housing Bond for affordable housing development, the network was able to convince Alameda County leaders to redeploy the funds initially allocated toward affordable housing development to displacement and homelessness prevention instead. The county has collected \$15 million over two years from former state redevelopment funds, commonly known as housing boomerang funds, which is now dedicated to anti-displacement and homeless prevention. The network also worked with the City of Berkeley’s new political leadership to secure new and unprecedented public funds for similar anti-displacement strategies.

Armed with these successes, the network approached City of Oakland officials with a similar proposition: to utilize Oakland’s housing boomerang funds for anti-displacement services. Network leaders who had previously worked in Oakland government understood the importance of identifying monies outside of the General Fund to dedicate to anti-displace-

18. The City of Oakland enacted:

- 1) a housing impact fee projected to generate about \$6 million annually;
- 2) a city infrastructure bond that included \$100 million for affordable housing; and
- 3) participated in a county-wide housing bond anticipated to yield \$200 million for Oakland projects.

19. The Committee to Protect Oakland Renters, comprised of ACCE, Causa Justa Just Cause, Oakland Tenants Union, EBASE, APEN, and other groups, initiated a ballot measure to fix the City of Oakland’s rent stabilization law. This would lead to City Council changes to the law, as well as a ballot measure to fix the city’s Just Cause Ordinance.

ment strategies.²⁰ City officials were originally very supportive and several councilmembers even volunteered to champion the effort. The anti-displacement plan that went to the City Council was data-driven, evidence-based, and designed to address the main reasons for why Oakland residents were losing their homes. Rising evictions and economic hardships were primary factors, which were further amplified by the fact that there are only nine and one-half tenant eviction defense attorneys in the entire county (Kalb 2017).

The council proposal created a coordinated Anti-Displacement Safety Net that wove together housing counseling, eviction legal defense, and emergency housing assistance for an estimated 3,300 low-income tenants and elderly homeowners who were at high risk of displacement. The proposal sought \$2 million annually from the City of Oakland to create a universal Anti-Displacement Safety Net and leveraged \$6 million in non-city funds that network leaders had raised. The strategies to preserve housing for vulnerable residents would have cost the city about \$2,500 to \$5,000 per household, compared to the average city contribution of \$100,000 to build one affordable housing unit (Kalb 2017).

Despite original major support from councilmembers, the highly politicized and disorganized City of Oakland budget process resulted in some of the initial council champions, at the 11th hour, going back on their commitments and using more than half of the housing boomerang funds for different priorities. Last minute horse-trading among several of the councilmembers compromised community and other governmental efforts to address the needs of some of Oakland's most vulnerable residents.

Our experience shows that even with good intentions and good people, given the realities of local politics, there is a need for outside accountability and compliance in order to support bold and timely action by local governments. Despite political rhetoric about the city's concern for displacement of long-time residents and Oakland's "secret sauce" of cultural diversity, city actions were ultimately defined by the people at the decision-making table; decision-makers who are not lower-income residents on the verge of losing their homes. Changing this status quo requires concerted outside

20. About half of Oakland's \$1.2 billion per two years General Fund budget is deployed for police and fire services. This leaves the remainder to be divided amongst every other basic city function, which means that important community services like senior centers, head start programs, libraries, and parks are on constant vigilance for budget cuts.

pressure. A state framework, through the passage of new state laws that actually require cities to implement anti-displacement actions, would be an important solution.

CONCLUSION

Addressing our nation's housing crisis requires addressing the often over-looked human displacement crisis. History teaches us that social change movements succeed when there is a sense of collective self-interest, as seen with the environmental movement, or when enough people's moral outrage is pricked, as seen with the civil rights or South African anti-apartheid movements. We believe that both ingredients exist with the problem of urban displacement. To achieve social change, anti-displacement solutions require the advancement of idealistic visions—so that what is today's impossible can become tomorrow's possible. The soul of our cities and our values as a society are on the line. In the words of activist turned first President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel,

Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out... It is the deepest and most important form of hope which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now (Havel 2004, 82–83).

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