

The Importance of Safe and Affordable Housing for Children

It's clear that for children to thrive- physically as well as emotionally and economically – safe and affordable housing is absolutely essential. Safe, affordable housing is integral to the creation of a comfortable environment that nurtures children, ensures their physical well-being, and connects them with their communities. It is a key ingredient in the formula for future success. Without safe and affordable housing, families have trouble managing their daily lives and their children's safety, health, and development suffer.

Local Housing Concerns

Through Couleecap's 2007 Needs Assessment, low-income households in La Crosse, Monroe, Vernon, and Crawford counties identified housing issues as the second highest problem area for their families. Significant concerns included the inability to buy a house and the cost of heating bills, rent, home repairs and maintenance, and property taxes.

Housing prices, both rental and home ownership, are out pacing the wages of working people in our communities. For example, in La Crosse County, from 2000-2005, housing prices increased 30% while wages only increased 16%. This makes it increasingly difficult for lower wage earners to afford housing. Families who pay more than they can afford for housing have too little left over for other necessities such as food, clothing, and health care. They may not be able to pay for transportation and child care, which makes it harder to go to work and school each day. As a result, families can end up losing their homes, living in substandard housing, or becoming homeless.

Paying Too Much for Housing Costs

Housing and housing-related expenses such as rent or mortgage payments, property taxes, insurance, utilities, and maintenance take the largest portion of most family incomes. According to HUD (Department of Housing & Urban Development), the generally accepted definition of affordability is for a household to pay no more than 30% of its annual income on housing. Low-income families have a very hard time finding housing that does not cost them more than 30% of their income. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2007 American Community Survey shows that more than 18 million homeowners and more than 16 million renters in the United States pay 30% or more of their income on housing costs. The following table lists this data for three counties in Couleecap's service area, with the State of Wisconsin included for comparison. (Data for Crawford County is not available from this survey)

	La Crosse	Monroe	Vernon	Wisconsin
Owner-Occupied Units	30,014	12,727	9,337	1,571,557
Homeowners Paying 30-34.9% of Income on Housing Costs	1,985 (6.7%)	800 (6.3%)	441 (4.8%)	103,579 (6.6%)
Homeowners Paying 35% or More of Income on Housing Costs	4,133 (13.8%)	1,823 (14.4%)	1,505 (16.2%)	252,122 (16.1%)
Renter-Occupied Units	14,438	4,684	2,789	663,689
Renters Paying 30-34.9% of Income on Housing Costs	1,522 (10.6%)	419 (9.0%)	192 (6.9%)	54,013 (8.2%)
Renters Paying 35% or More of Income on Housing Costs	4,527 (31.4%)	1,119 (23.9%)	689 (24.7%)	226,133 (34.1%)

Foreclosure Crisis

The current foreclosure crisis is affecting the entire housing market. It is predicted that 6.5 million Americans will lose their homes to foreclosure in the next five years. Foreclosure filings of all kinds, including notices of defaults, notices of auctions, and bank repossessions continue to rise. Locally, there was an alarming increase in foreclosure rates from 2007 to 2008:

	Crawford	La Crosse	Monroe	Vernon
Number of Foreclosures in 2007	32	228	120	41
Number of Foreclosures in 2008	33	291	171	72
Percent Increase	3.1%	27.6%	42.5%	75.6%

Substandard Housing

There is an issue of quality with regard to the available stock of affordable housing in our communities. A lot of the housing that lower income families can afford is older and potentially less safe, presenting hazards like mold and lead paint. Poor quality, unaffordable housing makes it harder for families to escape poverty, and makes their lives worse. In Wisconsin, approximately 455,000 dwellings have lead hazards, of which about 80,000 are occupied by families with young children.

Homelessness

According to a new report, America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness, released on March 10, 2009 by the National Center on Family Homelessness, finds more than 1.5 million children are homeless annually in the United States – one in every 50 American children. Children experiencing homelessness have twice the rate of moderate to severe health conditions compared to middle class children, and twice the emotional problems. They struggle in school, with an average 16% lower proficiency in math and reading, and an estimated graduation rate below 25%. According to this report, there are 12,047 homeless children in Wisconsin.

A Point in Time survey is conducted twice a year to collect data on the number of homeless people in Wisconsin. Results from the most recent survey conducted on January 28, 2009 showed that 342 people were homeless in La Crosse County; 130 people were homeless in Monroe County; 18 people were homeless in Vernon County; and 15 people were homeless in Crawford County on that day.

What are the Effects of Inadequate Housing on Children?

In 1999, the Family Housing Fund and other partners conducted the Kid's Mobility Project. The results confirmed the researchers' suspicions that frequent moves affect school performance and that poor housing and family instability lead to frequent residential moves. Project findings included:

- **Housing Costs Affect Health and Nutrition:** Parents under economic stress are frequently unable to provide adequate physical care, including nutrition, and they may be too preoccupied to provide the nurturing and support their children need to form secure attachments, especially at young ages. When too much of the family income is spent on housing, parents are forced to skimp on food, and children suffer from poor nutrition, which can lead to chronic health problems and decreased school performance.
- **Unstable Housing and Child Health:** Inadequate housing often poses health risks for children who live there. These risks may include asthma, lead poisoning, mold allergies, increased respiratory or other infections, or diseases carried by cockroaches or other pests. Health risks are particularly problematic in substandard housing, which is often the only option for families at the lowest income levels.
- **Unstable Housing and Child School Performance:** Insecure housing and frequent mobility have been shown to result in frequent absences and poorer school performance. When children don't have stable and secure shelter, they are much less able to learn than children who do. With reading and math performance lower, their ability to succeed in high stakes testing will be impaired. Overall literacy is also impaired.
- **Unstable Housing and Parenting Challenges:** Parents struggling to provide adequate housing may be unable to give their children the kind of support they need to learn well, and may not maintain connections with school,

read to the children, provide consistent support for homework, a positive home learning environment, or appropriate role modeling.

- **Economic Stress and Sobriety:** A correlation has been found between economic stress in the family and negative behaviors such as alcoholism in adolescents in the families affected.
- **Poverty and an Unstable Neighborhood:** When people live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, they are at greater risk of becoming involved in criminal behavior, including violent crime and drug use. This is due in part to the lack of role models and other stabilizing influences.

In 2007, the Center for Housing Policy and Enterprise Community Partners released two reports that focused on the positive impacts of affordable housing on health and education. Findings included:

- Affordable housing may improve health outcomes by freeing up family resources for nutritious food and health care expenditures.
- Affordable housing can reduce stress and related adverse health outcomes.
- Affordable housing fosters greater self-esteem, increased residential stability, and an increased sense of security and control over one's physical environment.
- Affordable housing supports children's educational achievement by reducing homelessness among families with children.
- Affordable housing contributes to children's educational achievement by reducing the frequency of unwanted moves that lead children to change schools and disrupt educational instruction.
- Affordable housing can reduce overcrowding and other sources of housing-related stress that lead to poor educational outcomes by allowing families to afford decent-quality homes of their own. The findings went on to say that homeownership may provide a platform for helping children do better in schools.

Subsidized Housing

Subsidized housing plays an important role in providing safe and affordable housing for low-income families and children. The Housing Authority of the City of La Crosse reports that currently there are 191 families (including 345 children) in housing authority units and 140 families (including 87 children) on the Section 8 Voucher program. There are waiting lists for both of these programs, with 97 families (including 137 children) waiting for public housing and 134 families (including 268 children) waiting to get on the Section 8 Voucher program.

The La Crosse County Housing Authority (LCHA) reports that currently there are 705 families (including 432 children) in housing authority units. Families pay 30% of their income for rent. Their programs have waiting lists of a minimum of one to two years depending on the location. LCHA tax credit programs and Whispering Pines (housing for people ages 62 and older) in West Salem have a six month or less waiting list.

Homeownership

Homeownership has been found to encourage stronger families, more success in K-12 school performance, and greater success later in life. Compared to the children of renters (of the same age, income, race, etc.), the children of homeowners are:

- 25% more likely to graduate from high school;
- 116% more likely to graduate from college;
- 20% less likely to become teenage mothers;
- 59% more likely to own a home within 10 years of moving from their parent's household.

Children of homeowners have been shown to have higher math and reading scores, fewer behavioral problems, and are less likely to have alcohol and substance abuse problems.

Homeownership also builds wealth for low-income families. This new wealth will serve the family by providing a family built safety net when health or other problems arise, provide first-generation college graduates and business ownership, and provide retirement savings.

Community Land Trust: An Innovative Solution to Affordable Homeownership

A Community Land Trust (CLT) is an innovative tool that provides permanently affordable housing for low and moderate income households. What makes the CLT approach unique is that housing units developed within the CLT are affordable forever. The power of the CLT comes from employing a “shared-appreciation” model. A home is constructed or purchased by the CLT and is sold to an income-qualified household while it retains ownership of the underlying land. When the homebuyer purchases the home, they enter into a “shared-appreciation agreement” with the CLT. This limits the amount of appreciation the homebuyer can receive when the homebuyer sells their house at some point in the future. The homebuyer enters into the agreement because it allows them to access the subsidy and housing market. The CLT then can control the price of the house at resale, so that it can be affordable to another low-income household. At resale the homebuyer still receives a share of the appreciation, just not all of it. The remainder of the appreciation is kept with the property so that it is affordable to the next homebuyer.

Currently there are over 200 CLTs across the United States. Locally, Couleecap has identified the establishment of the Coulee Community Land Trust as an important next step in ensuring the long-term viability of affordable housing in our region. Working through a sister non-profit corporation, the Coulee Housing Development Corporation (CHDC), Couleecap has committed staff and housing expertise to this effort. Couleecap’s goal is to have over 50 single-family homes in the land trust by 2012.

Together, We Can Make a Difference

The lack of safe and affordable housing and its impact on local children and their families affects us all. We need to work together to ensure all families have safe and affordable housing. Here are some ways you can get involved in your community:

- Make a donation to Couleecap’s People Helping People Initiative to help meet the needs of low-income families.
- Educate yourself about affordable housing issues. Visit your local library or websites on the Internet. Some informative websites include: Couleecap – www.couleecap.org; Wisconsin Vision 2020 – www.2020wi.org; and Center for Housing Policy – www.nhc.org.
- Support and vote for local elected officials who care about affordable housing issues.
- Increase affordable housing by joining a local housing coalition.
- Support affordable housing development programs.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency for people in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin. We currently implement more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, emergency assistance, child and family development, business development, employment, transportation, and health. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 15,000 families work towards self-sufficiency. For more information about our People Helping People Initiative or to make a donation, contact Kadie Brueggen, Development Coordinator, at 608-634-7363 or Kadie.Brueggen@couleecap.org.

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