



# U.S. State of Advocacy 2016



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# 1. Foreword



In the past year, the network leveraging Habitat for Humanity's local and statewide organizations across the United States for advocacy has grown stronger. Over a longer period, Habitat for Humanity International has been gradually building the infrastructure to promote policies and systems that improve the quality and cost of housing for low-income families nationwide. These efforts included local- and state-focused advocacy and policy training workshops, the establishment of a policy newsletter – the *U.S. Policy Update* – recruiting grassroots leaders for

Habitat Advocacy Ambassadors, securing advocacy as a “core pillar” for Habitat’s 30 state support organizations, distributing grants to support advocacy work, and more recently, establishing forums of Habitat housing advocacy specialists like those on the policy and advocacy advisory group.

The network is growing stronger because the advocacy committee of HFHI’s U.S. Council set course to establish a common, overarching agenda for the entire U.S. Habitat for Humanity family of local affiliates and state support organizations. We identified four themes of Habitat’s advocacy and policy work through an analysis of data reports and through testimonies given to us by dozens of our affiliates across the country:

1. To advance homeownership opportunities for low-income households.
2. To promote access to safe, healthy and affordable housing.
3. To promote financial stability for individuals and families.
4. To cultivate and preserve healthy and vibrant communities.

This national agenda provides a prototype for each of our affiliates to use in a way that promotes advocacy on a more communal level than Habitat has ever seen. Using these themes as an archetype, we can implore our network – to use HFHI CEO Jonathan Reckford’s phrasing – to “use our voices and not just our hammers.”

The results of this stronger network won’t be fully realized for some time. But in this report you will see how Habitat’s influence and reach to promote policies and systems that support low-income homeownership and quality, affordable housing are becoming increasingly strategic and involving many partners.

Chris Vincent  
Vice President, Government Relations and Advocacy  
Habitat for Humanity International

## 2. Preamble

Every day, Habitat for Humanity puts shelter on people's hearts and minds in unique and powerful ways, leading them to volunteer, to donate, and to advocate for improving policies and systems that underlie the housing challenges so many families face. Over the past 20 years, Habitat's public policy advocacy has enabled its affiliates to serve thousands more families, while also advancing broader access to a range of rental and ownership housing solutions for low-income households. With nearly 1,400 U.S. affiliates and hundreds of thousands of homeowners, donors, volunteers, advocates and other supporters, however, Habitat has the potential to accomplish much more.

The proceeding report frames the achievements of Habitat for Humanity International and the U.S. Habitat network through our new U.S. national advocacy agenda, which was approved by the U.S. Council in September. The agenda, the first statement of the U.S. Habitat network's public policy views and priorities, represents an exciting and important step forward in implementing the advocacy component of our current strategic plan, which calls for us to reach beyond the Habitat model and benefit the housing sector more broadly. In 2016, we saw many notable successes in this regard.

## 3. Advocacy achievements

### Advance homeownership opportunities for low-income households

Homeownership has the unique potential to remove barriers to a better, healthier and more financially stable future. It provides individuals and families with more stability and offers a secure way to build long-term wealth. Moreover, higher homeownership rates have broad community benefits, including higher overall home values, lower crime rates and better school systems. Policymakers at every level of government – local, state and federal – should champion solutions that increase access to sustainable homeownership, particularly for first-time, lower-income homebuyers.



Jonathan Reckford and the Georgia Habitat delegation meets with U.S. Representative Sanford Bishop of Georgia during Habitat on the Hill.

### Fiscal year 2016 achievements

**Government grants:** Thousands of Habitat affiliates benefit from publicly available government grants, including the HOME Investments Partnership Program,

or HOME; the Self-Help Homeownership Opportunity Program, or SHOP; the Section 4 Capacity Building Program; and the Community Development Block

Grants, or CDBG, all of which are funded by Congress through appropriations. Habitat and other grant users faced an uphill battle with the FY2016 appropriations levels; HOME and SHOP faced significant funding reductions to support other initiatives. Habitat responded vigorously by working in coalition and mobilizing our nationwide grassroots over several months. Congress restored funding, and congressional aides credit the restored funds to Habitat's visits, phone calls and emails. By December 2015, Congress had approved a deal that set level funding from FY2015 for SHOP (\$10 million), Section 4 (\$35 million), and CDBG (\$3 billion). Most notably, HOME received a \$50 million increase over the FY2015 level to \$950 million in FY2016, which is significant given that HOME funding was proposed to be cut by 93 percent earlier in the year.

**Mortgage regulation:** HFHI continued to seek clarity and relief for Habitat affiliates so that they may safely accept donated appraisals. This is important for two reasons. First, because Habitat typically sells its homes for less than the cost of construction, Habitat homeowners usually carry two mortgages: a first lien covering the price of the house charged to the family and a subordinate lien covering the difference between the price and the appraised value. Many of the appraisals that Habitat receives are in-kind donations given by appraisers, enabling affiliates to reduce costs and sell their homes at a more affordable price.

The second reason is that the Dodd-Frank statute and implementing regulations added new appraisal independence regulations, including a requirement that fee appraisers be paid "customary and reasonable" fees (12 CFR §1026.42). Appraisal donations could be interpreted to be in violation of this requirement, since the appraiser is not being paid. Although the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has provided informal guidance suggesting that the provision does not apply to donated appraisals because an appraiser is no longer

**Network mobilized:** Funding for the HOME program was also under serious threat of being virtually eliminated because of a proposed 93 percent budget cut for FY2016. HFHI mobilized the Habitat network to fight these cuts and advocate for level or increased funding. Throughout the year, HFHI and the U.S. network advocated for HOME at Habitat on the Hill and as part of the HOME Coalition. In addition to those regular advocacy efforts, Habitat's Government Relations and Advocacy Office created a number of new mobilization materials and resources for affiliates to use in their own districts, including a tool kit, social media infographics and talking points. These led not only to hundreds of people taking action through HFHI's online action alert, but also to hundreds more taking action through Habitat affiliates and contacting their representatives through phone calls or meeting requests. As a result, the FY2016 budget included \$950 million for HOME, which is estimated to impact 113,120 people. This number was calculated by dividing the total program funding over the course of the program by the number of units produced to get the average cost per unit. The \$950 million funding was divided by the average cost per unit to estimate that the HOME funds impacted 43,845 units. The projected number of units multiplied by the average number of people per household – 2.58 – equals 113,120.

a “fee appraiser” if a fee is not charged for a particular transaction, this guidance is both inconsistent with the common industry usage of the term “fee appraiser” and lacks the legal authority to protect Habitat affiliates from enforcement actions.

For these reasons, HFHI supported the introduction of two bills in Congress: HR 3704 and S 2085, which provide statutory permission for Habitat to accept donated appraisals. HFHI and its supporters in Congress will continue to advocate their adoption into law.

**Policymakers at every level of government – local, state and federal – should champion solutions that increase access to sustainable homeownership, particularly for first-time, lower-income homebuyers.**

**Tax relief:** In early 2015, The South Carolina Association of Habitat Affiliates began advocating for a law that would exempt builders of affordable homes from sales tax on building materials for new construction and repair work. The association identified state legislators in both houses to help draft, introduce and champion the legislation, and just six months later, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley signed the bill into law.

The association helped steer the bill through both houses by following a simple and straightforward strategy:

- 1) Meeting with legislators to discuss the need for the legislation.
- 2) Hosting a legislative day for South Carolina Habitat affiliates to meet directly with their representatives.
- 3) Mobilizing affiliates and their supporters to urge their representatives to support the bill. The law took effect Jan. 1, 2016, and the anticipated savings for Habitat affiliates statewide is an estimated \$2,000 to \$4,000 per home built. With these savings, South Carolina Habitat affiliates should be able to build one additional home for every 20 built; that’s an additional five families per year obtaining quality, affordable homes.

The association took home Habitat for Humanity’s 2016 Advocacy Award for its work and accomplishments on tax reform.



## Promote access to safe, decent, affordable housing

Housing stability – the peace of having an affordable, fixed place to call home – yields better health outcomes, improved educational performance and myriad other benefits. Current public and private housing investments for low-income families across the housing continuum, from rental to homeownership, are meeting only a fraction of the current need. To meet the country’s critical housing need, policymakers at every level of government should act to stimulate private investment in housing production, enact innovative policies to increase the stock of affordable housing, and provide targeted housing resources to support families not served by the market. In addition to meeting the overall housing need, policymakers should support efforts that benefit the long-term maintenance and preservation of homes, provide for better accessibility for aging populations, and promote health through housing.

### *FY2016 achievements*

**Housing finance reform:** The role of the secondary mortgage market ensures that there is adequate liquidity for all levels of homeownership, along with numerous commercial multifamily mortgages.

Institutions like Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, the 11 regional Federal Home Loan Banks (collectively the Government Sponsored Enterprises), and private financial institutions provide the financial

infrastructure that supports long-term, fixed-rate mortgages, such as the 30-year fixed-rate mortgage, that ensure affordable home loans and uphold the nation's value in homeownership.

During the foreclosure and credit crisis, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac suffered financially and have been held in government conservatorship since 2008. While these enterprises are performing financially better today, their future is linked with a larger policy issue around the future of the secondary mortgage market called Housing Finance Reform, which requires congressional action. However, although the subject is complex and there is little political will by Congress to act, Housing Finance Reform must be done correctly in order to ensure that the values of homeownership today – and the general costs of housing – are adequately supported and addressed.

Habitat for Humanity International is prioritizing implementation of responsible housing finance reform, because the structure of housing finance systems, e.g., potentially converting Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac into either wholly private institutions or government-owned utilities, could have enormous consequences for the access to and affordability of mortgage credit, along with access to funding for developing housing that is affordable for lower-income households, such as the Federal Home Loan Banks' Affordable Housing Program and the National Housing Trust Fund. Habitat for Humanity will continue to monitor the actions of the Senate Banking Committee and House Financial Services Committee regarding the future of homeownership finance and to advocate for a stable, secure housing finance system that protects the American taxpayer while broadening access to quality housing for everyone in the U.S.

**Housing trust funds:** Housing trust funds are critical sources of funds for supporting low-income housing. Habitat believes these dedicated funds are important for every community to ensure they have adequate

assistance for families who are at risk of homelessness or displacement or otherwise in need of housing support. Funding them through dedicated sources, such as fees charged at each real estate closing or through a portion of all income or property taxes paid, allocates significant resources that improve the conditions of low-income households in the community. However, housing trust funds are not available everywhere, and not all of them are funded. For example, although all but three states have authorized the establishment of housing trust funds, the trust funds for Alabama, Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana and Rhode Island have never been funded, and many others are not replenished regularly. While conversations are being had about how

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to provide dedicated, regular funding to housing trust funds, such as the study being conducted this year in Virginia, committing to such systems change is generally an exception.

Habitat organizations across the country value housing trust funds because they address shelter affordability, which helps support Habitat's mission to provide strength, stability and independence through a quality

home. Local Habitat affiliates achieved several victories in the past year:

- In November 2015, as a member of the Coalition for Nonprofit Housing and Economic Development, Habitat for Humanity of Washington, D.C., helped secure a unanimous vote by the D.C. Council for a \$100 million increase in D.C.'s Housing Production Trust Fund, in addition to a number of other funds for housing-related programs.
- Habitat for Humanity North Carolina, along with local Habitat affiliates in the state and other partners, advocated for and obtained an increase for the North Carolina Housing Trust Fund from \$6.8 million to \$7.66 million. That increase was significant, as the fund had been dwindling for many years, even as housing costs had not improved.
- In West Virginia, Habitat for Humanity affiliates, the Habitat state support organization and other housing partners successfully persuaded Governor Earl Ray Tomblin not to move forward with a proposal to dissolve the state Housing Trust Fund Commission and merge the fund and management control with another state housing agency (WV SB 397). Had the merger occurred, the change in management to the fund would have hurt the effectiveness of the dollars allocated, likely creating confusion and delays.

**Homeownership development tax credit:** Habitat for Humanity state support organizations asked HFHI's Office of Government Relations and Advocacy to produce model legislation for states to incentivize private giving to help low-income individuals and families construct and rehabilitate homes. With guidance from the state support organizations, the Government Relations and Advocacy Office consulted tax experts and government relations specialists at various levels

and produced model legislation for a state-level tax credit. The actual legislation introduced in the states will vary slightly, based on the housing needs and political and budgetary environment in each state. Generally, the proposals will call for public/private partnerships for small businesses to provide a significant tax credit to nonprofits developing homeownership opportunities. It would contrast with and simultaneously complement the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, or LIHTC, which incentivizes investors to support rental housing for low-income individuals and families. HFHI and the state support organizations expect to see several bills seeking the homeownership development tax credit introduced in state legislatures in 2017.

**Energy efficiency:** By and large, energy costs for low-income households are higher than for higher-income households; low-income homes tend to be older and typically were not built to be efficient. For these reasons, Habitat advocates for energy efficiency improvements for all low-income households.

In April 2016, the U.S. Senate passed Habitat's weatherization provisions as part of a large comprehensive energy bill. Over five years, HFHI has advocated for weatherization advocates on legislation that would reauthorize the Weatherization Assistance Program, or WAP, and the State Energy Program, or SEP, and more importantly for Habitat, authorize a new competitive grant program that would allow multistate nonprofits with a track record in energy efficiency work to compete for a small portion of WAP funds.

This achievement for Habitat's weatherization provisions may be a high-water mark for 2016, but it is also a significant milestone for Habitat's energy efficiency advocacy efforts. Habitat will continue to work toward getting nonprofits the ability to compete for weatherization funding with the belief that we can weatherize homes in a cost-effective manner that will have significant long-term financial and health benefits for our homeowners.



## Promote financial stability for individuals and families

Individuals and families who are financially stable have enough income to pay their housing costs and utilities, buy food and clothing, pay bills, and save for the future. Policymakers at all levels of government should support fair economic policies that enable low-income workers to provide for their families, build assets and achieve financial independence.

### *FY2016 achievements*

**Asset building:** Habitat supports individual development accounts, or IDAs, which are matched savings accounts that help people with low incomes save toward a

long-term financial goal, such as purchasing their own home. In March 2016, Governor Mike Pence of Indiana signed SB 325 (making it Indiana Public Law 50), which

supported individual development accounts, among other provisions, and also provided \$750,000 annually for downpayment/closing cost assistance to Indiana families.

**Predatory lending:** On June 2, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, or CFPB, released its long-awaited proposed regulations on payday, vehicle title and high-cost loans, in conjunction with a field hearing in Kansas City, Missouri. Representatives from Habitat Florida, Habitat Ohio, Habitat Omaha in Nebraska, and Truman-Heritage Habitat in Missouri traveled to speak in

person at the field hearing on behalf of the Habitat network.

Local and state Habitat advocates have been working to fight the predatory nature of payday, vehicle title and other high-cost loans for years, and Habitat has always believed that predatory lending undermines our efforts. In fact, we believe payday and vehicle title loans are barriers to affordable housing and a threat to housing security.

Habitat typically serves low-income families at 30 to 80 percent of the area median income, the same population being inundated with payday and vehicle title lenders. The vast majority of these borrowers use the loans for regular monthly expenses, including rent or mortgage payments and utilities. Habitat affiliates provide financial education to their homeowners that helps minimize the number of victims to predatory lending. Unfortunately, some Habitat homeowners enter their mortgages with outstanding payday loan debt, because such debts are rarely reported and are virtually invisible in credit reporting systems. Sometimes loans have been refinanced several times, resulting in debts significantly larger than the original cash advance, undermining Habitat's family selection and underwriting processes and threatening families' ability to repay their mortgages. For these reasons, Habitat has mobilized its network to express support for the CFPB's rulemaking, much of which was ongoing as this report was being written.

**Policymakers at all levels of government should support fair economic policies that enable low-income workers to provide for their families, build assets and achieve financial independence.**



## Cultivate and preserve healthy and vibrant communities

Healthy and vibrant communities, whether they are in urban, rural or suburban areas, provide a range of benefits to their residents, including quality housing, access to good schools and jobs, a sense of safety and inclusion, and opportunities for civic engagement. Policymakers should support policies that increase access to already-thriving communities and encourage public and private investment in order to revitalize neighborhoods that have experienced disinvestment.

### *FY2016 achievements*

**National Service:** Habitat relies on AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA, which provide long-term, skilled volunteers to Habitat organizations across the country. The programs are operated by the Corporation for National and Community Service, which is funded by Congress. Congressional discussions around the budget in 2015 focused on restraining spending and shifting government spending priorities, and many of the

programs Habitat relies on were caught in the middle. In November 2015, congressional appropriators were considering reducing CNCS funding by a devastating 20 percent – a cut that would eliminate up to 20,000 AmeriCorps positions nationwide, including many who could serve Habitat affiliates in the future, and that would downsize the AmeriCorps VISTA program, which supports the organizational capacity of Habitat affiliates.

In partnership with other CNCS stakeholders, HFHI mobilized local Habitat affiliates, including its AmeriCorps and VISTA members, to contact their U.S. senators and representatives to let them know that they highly value CNCS and that it should not be cut. The coalition's goal was to keep the same funding level for FY2016: \$1.05 billion. After hundreds of emails and phone calls, the budget was finalized, with CNCS receiving \$1.1 billion, a \$40 million increase from FY2015, which included:

- AmeriCorps State and National: \$386 million; a \$50 million increase from FY2015.
- AmeriCorps VISTA: \$92.4 million; level funding from FY2015.

**Civic engagement:** Although Habitat is committed to remaining nonpartisan under all circumstances, we also

believe that our staff members, donors and volunteers have a duty to participate in civics at various levels for the good of community. In June, HFHI provided its national network with training on effectively and appropriately raising the issues of housing during this election year with local, state and national candidates for office. In addition, we believe it is critical to ensure that the voices of housing advocates are registered and voting at the polls this November, and we are supporting and promoting "get out the vote" efforts. The Government Relations and Advocacy Office distributed a "get out the vote" tool kit to Habitat affiliates in fall 2016. In the words of Habitat's CEO, Jonathan Reckford, "The campaign season provides us with a great opportunity to build more inclusive and resilient communities by returning housing to the national agenda."

**FIGHTING BLIGHT:** Blight is a major problem in Macon, Georgia. Persistent blight – the phenomenon of abandoned and empty properties – undermines social cohesion, encourages crime and disinvestment, and reduces the property values of surrounding homes. Macon-Bibb County is conservatively estimated to have 4,000 blighted housing units. Acting in its role as a leading neighborhood revitalization agent in its community, Macon Area Habitat for Humanity launched a "Blight out of Sight" campaign in 2014. The affiliate, along with its campus chapters and partner organizations and the local government, set out to remove 90 blighted properties. Since the launch of the campaign, the Macon Area affiliate has used a number of other advocacy tactics to reduce blight in its community. In 2015, Mercer University and Wesleyan College Habitat for Humanity campus chapters focused on blight during their Act! Speak! Build! Week events by building a replica blight structure and collecting signatures on a petition demanding that the Macon-Bibb County government expand its blight eradication efforts. The campaign has already received recognition from both the media and lawmakers. The Center for Collaborative Journalism has given considerable media coverage to both the issue of blight and Habitat's work, and has funded a mobile app that allows residents to map blighted properties. Largely in response to the growing discourse set in motion by Habitat's work, Macon-Bibb County issued \$14 million in bond funding to address blight, and the mayor set a target of eliminating 100 properties per year. To date, 1,385 people have directly benefited from the removal of blight as a result of the affiliate's programmatic leadership and persistent advocacy.

## 4. Engaging with policymakers

### Habitat on the Hill

Habitat on the Hill is HFHI's legislative and advocacy conference for U.S. Habitat affiliates, state support organizations, campus chapters, young professionals networks, and Habitat homeowners, which convenes annually in Washington, D.C. Attendees receive training in advocacy techniques ranging from influencing policymakers to mobilizing the public, along with orientation on housing policy issues and insights from a balanced roster of speakers on the American political and policy landscape. The key feature of the conference is a day on Capitol Hill, where over 200 Habitat advocates hold over 300 meetings with congressional offices in a single afternoon. First-time attendees return to their communities driven to use their voice to speak on housing justice; veterans return to improve their knowledge, teach others and continue their conversations with their U.S. senators and representatives in their Capitol offices, not just in their districts.



### FY2016 achievements

- **Engaging 225 participants**, including nine Habitat homeowners, 23 AmeriCorps alumni, and 92 first-time attendees.
- **Arranging more than 300 meetings with members of Congress**, representing 35 states.

- **Receiving a direct address from a member of Congress** – Rep. Mark Meadows of South Carolina – during the conference (you can read more about his support for Habitat at [habitat.org/advocate](http://habitat.org/advocate)).
- **Hosting four plenary sessions**, including an inspiring address by Ron Fournier of the *National Journal* and a discussion about Habitat's global advocacy campaign, Solid Ground.
- **Organizing thousands** of online actions to support our in-person visits.
- **Inspiring countless** social media posts sharing news from the conference (on Twitter, search for the hashtag #HabitatOnTheHill).

## Women Build

In May 2016, in the week leading up to Mother's Day, Habitat held National Women Build Week. Women across the country, including policymakers and governor's wives, teamed up to help Habitat for Humanity pass on strength, stability and self-reliance and to focus on the unique housing challenges of women.

In events in over 300 communities, women policymakers and members of the public sector built homes and contemplated single mothers, victims of abuse, women working multiple jobs, and women providing for their families, along with the challenges of women in other parts of the world.

In West Virginia, U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito lent a hand to Mon County Habitat for Humanity.

Congresswoman Cheri Bustos co-chaired the Women Build in Peoria, Illinois, and worked on one of five homes Habitat is building in a new neighborhood. Cheri admired the future homeowner's dedication, saying, "Her motivation for going out there every Saturday and helping everyone else build the home she will eventually

own is that she wants a better place for her children. She wants a neighborhood where they can go out and play."

In Houston, Texas' first lady, Cecilia Abbott, said, "It was wonderful to see so many women working together to help create a brighter future for a Houston family."

## Presidential nominating conventions

The Democratic National Convention and Republican National Convention meet every four years to name their parties' candidates for president – among other things – and in each of the previous four conventions, Habitat has held a build in the host city to draw the attention of policymakers to the need for affordable housing and Habitat's direct service work to provide it. For the 2016 conventions, Republicans converged on Cleveland, Ohio, and Democrats gathered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The builds held in the convention host cities give Habitat sponsors, volunteers, delegates and elected officials an opportunity to experience a Habitat build while learning more about the host city beyond what's happening inside the convention walls. These builds have been very successful because they attract significant interest from corporate sponsors, legislators and the media during a time when they are looking for causes, stories and opportunities to connect with the host city. They also raise awareness about policy issues. In conjunction with the builds, HFHI produced materials such as social media graphics and newsletters to raise awareness of affordable housing issues among the Habitat network and the general public and to support Habitat's more specific advocacy efforts with policymakers.

At the Republican convention, Habitat for Humanity of Greater Cleveland organized a three-day "Buckeye Build" hosted by Senator Rob Portman of Ohio. The affiliate rehabbed two homes and led cleanup efforts at 11 more, all on a single street. The build received strong financial support from Owens-Corning, and Thrivent

provided both volunteers and funding. Habitat Greater Cleveland CEO John Habat was very pleased with how everything went, and expressed hope that other affiliates would see the benefits of hosting events contemporaneously with major political events. The build has received significant attention in both the local and national media, including *The New York Times*.

Habitat also was a sponsor of the “Make Room” campaign’s barbecue and concert by country act Big & Rich during the Republican convention. The campaign, a project of Enterprise Community Partners and the J. Ronald Terwilliger Foundation, aims to elevate rental housing on the agendas of national leaders and advocate for better policies through telling the stories of real families who can’t make rent every day. The event attracted 1,200 attendees, including many convention delegates and current and past members of Congress. It was an opportunity suited for drawing the attention of a broad audience to the issue of affordable housing.

On the first day of the Democratic convention, Thrivent Builds, an initiative of Habitat partner Thrivent Financial, joined Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia in hosting a one-day build in Diamond Park, a townhome development that will be home to 21 Habitat Philadelphia families. U.S. Representative Mark Pocan of Wisconsin helped on the build, along with staff members from several other Democrat officials. Thrivent Financial sponsored the event and provided the volunteers.

### Strategic Investment in Advocacy Grants

Habitat for Humanity International awards grants to support Habitat organizations in work that promotes policies and systems that eliminate restraints contributing to inadequate housing. The strategic investment grants focus on two primary objectives:

- 1) Build and increase capacity within Habitat organizations to engage in advocacy efforts using a wide array of resources.

- 2) Incentivize advocacy activities and efforts, including grassroots mobilization, direct engagement with policymakers, and education of policymakers to address barriers to quality, affordable housing.

In 2015 and 2016, Habitat’s Government Relations and Advocacy Office awarded several state support organizations with Strategic Investment in Advocacy Grants. The awarded organizations had significant outcomes on several of the issues they identified as part of their focus:

- The appropriation of \$8 million into the Virginia Housing Trust fund through the biennial budget. Advocacy efforts were led by the Virginia Housing Coalition in conjunction with Habitat Virginia.
- A savings of \$200,000 annually for 30 Habitat affiliates in Oregon through the enactment of HB 2690-A. The enacted bill provides Habitat affiliates with an exemption from paying property taxes for up to 10 years on vacant land that will be used to help families build homes. This was the result of a concerted effort by Habitat Oregon and an advocacy grant from HFHI.
- The establishment of a formal coalition to protect the South Dakota housing trust fund and promote permanent sources of funding. This capitalizes on the success of the state support organization and an informal statewide coalition in establishing the housing trust fund in 2013, which secured a one-time appropriation of \$1.9 million, benefiting 261 families.
- A gathering of leaders from over 20 Habitat affiliates from across Texas for a three-day intensive advocacy retreat. The retreat focused on policy development, advocacy and research, coalitions, internal and external communications and mobilization, and board and staff engagement. It was part of a series of training events culminating in the 2016 Lone Star Summit in August, where focus groups developed the state policy agenda for the 2017 legislative session in Texas.

## 5. A common advocacy agenda



In February 2016, the advocacy committee of Habitat for Humanity’s U.S. Council, a board composed of Habitat affiliate leaders to advise HFHI on U.S. operations, commissioned the development of a national advocacy agenda. After great discussion, the committee deemed it to be an essential step for Habitat to have a focused nationwide impact through advocacy.

The committee, with support from the U.S. Council and HFHI, spent six months collecting data, gathering input and soliciting feedback from the full Habitat network to inform the agenda. At the end of the six-month period, HFHI held a two-month public comment phase on a draft of the agenda, which was promoted through various Habitat channels, including the *U.S. Office News* e-newsletter; the My.Habitat intranet site; *Neighborhood Corner*, the e-newsletter of Habitat’s neighborhood revitalization network; Facebook; and Habitat’s grassroots advocacy ambassador e-newsletters. It also was coordinated with Habitat state support organizations. The draft was downloaded over 350 times on My.Habitat; affiliates, state support organizations and HFHI staff members

provided 75 unique comments; and over 75 U.S. Habitat organizations provided specific and direct feedback on the draft agenda. The final national advocacy agenda was presented and approved by the U.S. Council at an in-person meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, on Sept. 20, 2016.

The four themes, ranging from homeownership to communities, provide a common language for the U.S. Habitat network to work together toward common goals and discuss strategies and solutions. We are confident that this structure provides stakeholders, donors, volunteers and policymakers a window into Habitat’s collective public policy interests across the U.S.

In the proceeding months and years, HFHI will work with the network to use their voices to bring about changes to policies and systems that will remove barriers to affordable and quality homes. We want to capture the hearts and minds of policymakers, Habitat supporters and volunteers – and the general public – to make a nation where everyone has a safe, decent and affordable place to live.



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