

## HABITAT FOR HUMANITY OF GREATER NEWBURGH

# Using advocacy to accelerate revitalization in Newburgh, New York

Over the past six years, Habitat of Greater Newburgh has played a major role in revitalizing highly distressed pockets of Newburgh. While working collaboratively to transform one block at a time through home renovations and new construction, Habitat also has nurtured new advocacy efforts, including the formation of a new neighborhood association, that have led to millions in new funding for asbestos and lead remediation, and major street improvements that are improving the health and safety of targeted Newburgh neighborhoods.

## Background

Newburgh is 60 miles north of New York City, along the western edge of the Hudson River. The small city of fewer than 30,000 residents is the most distressed urban area in the state of New York. High poverty and unemployment rates far exceed the national average. The recent economic recession only exacerbated the city's decline.<sup>1</sup>

Vacant and dilapidated homes are a major challenge, particularly in the city's historic East End neighborhood, where approximately 770 buildings are abandoned. The old age and poor condition of most homes increases lead exposure; children's lead levels here are three times the state average.<sup>2</sup>

In 2011, Habitat Newburgh adopted Habitat for Humanity International's neighborhood revitalization strategy to have a bigger impact on the long-term health, safety and quality of life of Newburgh. This was a significant shift, spurring Habitat Newburgh to look at its work "not just in terms of number of homes, but as part of the tapestry of the community," explains Cathy Collins, the executive director. It became clear that neighborhood revitalization "was not something that Habitat was going to be able to solve alone," Collins says. "We recognized that we needed to be playing in a bigger sandbox and thinking about what was happening to families in their communities."

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While focusing its homebuilding efforts on hard-hit East Parmenter Street, with 22 new and renovated homes, Habitat Newburgh started forming relationships with partner organizations outside of Habitat's "bubble" and thinking more broadly about "systems change," Collins says. The organizations discussed concentrating development activities in other targeted blocks where combined efforts could have a profound effect on overall living conditions. These conversations laid the groundwork for coordinated development and, soon, collaborative advocacy.

## Limited funding for lead and asbestos removal

It quickly became apparent that to revitalize other parts of the highly distressed East End neighborhood and increase the scale of Habitat's rehabilitation work, Habitat Newburgh needed to address the high costs of remediating asbestos and lead. Many homes in Newburgh are affected by these hazards, especially older properties in which significant rehabilitation must disturb walls and windows. The cost of remediation in Newburgh ranges from \$40,000 to \$100,000 per

<sup>1</sup> CORE, *Community Conditions Field Study: City of Newburgh, New York*, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> [recordonline.com/article/20141015/NEWS/141019634](http://recordonline.com/article/20141015/NEWS/141019634)

home. Without external assistance, this funding has to come out of Habitat's general budget. Lacking extra resources, Habitat has to pass on restoring otherwise structurally sound homes.

Like many communities, the City of Newburgh does not have dedicated funding for asbestos removal. Lead removal assistance is available through the county's Lead Hazard Reduction Program, supported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, but it is only for homes already occupied by residents. Habitat Newburgh cannot access this assistance to make homes safe before a family moves in.

## Advocacy

To address the scale of the city's lead and asbestos problem, Habitat Newburgh realized it had to become more intentional in its advocacy. Collins describes Habitat Newburgh's advocacy before 2011 as reactive or "incidental." In 2011, Habitat Newburgh made advocacy part of its strategic plan. The affiliate also convened a wide range of housing organizations and government agency representatives to form the Newburgh Housing Coalition. The purpose of the coalition is to meet regularly to discuss and take action on larger issues affecting community quality of life.

As Habitat Newburgh talked about the problem of lead and asbestos costs with other coalition partners, it became clear that the problem affected more than just Habitat, and that the city needed a new funding source for removing lead and asbestos.

## NEW ASBESTOS AND LEAD FUNDING

Habitat brought the issue to the Newburgh Community Land Bank, or NCLB, a state-enabled nonprofit that works to bring blighted, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties back to productive use. Spurred by Habitat's advocacy, NCLB applied for, and was ultimately awarded, more than \$4 million from the state attorney general's new Land Bank Community Revitalization Initiative. NCLB used the funds to create the Newburgh Building Preservation Program, through which NCLB removes lead and asbestos from dilapidated Newburgh homes before selling them at cost to Habitat and other developers. NCLB also conducts needed evaluations.

NCLB's pre-acquisition remediation has been a boon to revitalization efforts by Habitat and its collaborators. By 2016, NCLB had remediated 36 properties, including eight subsequently rehabilitated by Habitat.

The Newburgh Housing Coalition is now working to identify a *permanent* source for lead and asbestos remediation. In May 2018, a congressman reached out to Collins to explore potential federal sources of funding. The Newburgh Housing Coalition would help multiple local voices participate in this conversation, Collins says. Habitat's advocacy also has prompted affiliates across the state to begin discussing advocacy for a state source of permanent funding.

## STREETLIGHTS

In 2014, families moved into 22 newly renovated Habitat homes on East Parmenter Street. The impact was transformational. Families soon realized, however, that the street still did not have the streetlights that had been promised as part of Habitat's agreement with the city.

Habitat Newburgh brought the issue to the attention of its volunteers at one of Habitat's twice-weekly "coffee breaks," where volunteers from active build sites take a half-hour break to meet other volunteers and learn about Habitat's work. Between 40 and 100 volunteers regularly attend. Staff members shared the city manager's phone number with the volunteers so that they could call to let the city know how much it would mean to them for the city to fix the lighting issue. Many volunteers had worked alongside the families now living on the dark street. Dozens of calls went in. The city quickly found lights for Habitat to refurbish and install.

The experience was eye-opening for Collins. It demonstrated that volunteers really care about the families and are motivated to action by these connections, whether or not they would describe what they are doing as "advocacy." Collins also is aware that she and other Habitat staff members would not have had the "weight" to make this happen on their own.

Habitat Newburgh continues to integrate advocacy into multiple facets of its operations, including communications and volunteer engagement. This past January, for the first time, volunteers joined staff members and the board president at New York State Habitat Lobby Day. Next year, the affiliate hopes to get more volunteers to participate, and to engage homeowners as well. Perhaps most significantly for Collins, volunteers are now sharing their experiences and encouraging other volunteers to participate in advocacy events like Lobby Day.

### BROADWAY RIVER DISTRICT NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

An important part of Habitat Newburgh's work on East Parmenter Street and nearby South Miller Street was forming a neighborhood association. The organization includes both Habitat and non-Habitat residents. Habitat brought in a facilitator to help start the association and then stepped back. The association decides for itself what issues it will work on. Early on, the association moved independently to advocate to the City Council for additional street improvements. The association sought more street lighting, a speed strip and the conversion of a two-way street to one-way, making it safer for children. It received unanimous support from the council, and the street changes are now being made. "Habitat Newburgh could not have gotten those changes on our own, even with the best PowerPoints," Collins says. "Even with the housing coalition."

### CITY AND STATE PLANNING EFFORTS

Habitat Newburgh and the Newburgh Housing Coalition are now developing the housing portion of the city's strategic plan. Habitat and other Housing Coalition members are also closely involved in developing the investment plan for New York's Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative, or ESPRI. The Housing Coalition helped facilitate conversations with low-income residents about housing, education, workforce development and health to inform decisions about how to allocate a \$1 million statewide grant. Collins chairs the initiative's housing work group and serves on the ESPRI steering committee.

### Impacts

Since 2012, Habitat Newburgh's advocacy has evolved from "incidental" to "intentional" to "integrated" to what now could be called "institutional." Key impacts include:

- **\$4 million for lead and asbestos removal.** This new resource, administered by the Newburgh Community Land Bank, supports not just Habitat's rehabilitation efforts, but also those of other housing organizations restoring abandoned or dilapidated homes in the city.
- **Streetlights.** Habitat's volunteers persuaded the city to expedite the installation of streetlights on newly restored East Parmenter Street to further safety improvements there.
- **Creation of the Newburgh Housing Coalition.** The coalition, instigated by Habitat Newburgh, is the outgrowth of patient relationship-building with other organizations focused on neighborhood revitalization. It is playing an important role in informing city and state housing and revitalization plans, and has a voice in state funding decisions.
- **Creation of the Broadway River District Neighborhood Association.** Collins considers the neighborhood association to be one of Habitat Newburgh's most important accomplishments over the past six years. "The ultimate impact," she says, "is helping people get a sense that they have the power to overcome things. It's very unusual for there to be a neighborhood association in this area. People don't have a sense that they can organize and create change. But residents here found the power in their voices. It will go on long after I'm gone."

### Lessons

1. **Success starts with relationships.** Newburgh lacks the natural ties that might be found in a less-blighted community, Collins says, so "it is especially important to build that connective tissue before you can blast off." Finding the time to meet with other organizations and build trust can be challenging, so Collins argues that it is important to measure and value the affiliate's work to build relationships. "There can be wins that

don't necessarily mean you got legislation passed," she says. "Our legislative wins wouldn't have happened without all the relationship-building work."

2. **Have patience with advocacy.** "Don't have unrealistic expectations of immediacy," Collins says. "But if you keep at it, something solid forms." Caitlin Dalton, Habitat Newburgh's communication and marketing coordinator, acknowledges that it can be particularly hard to shift the organization's culture. "At first, people didn't want to get involved in 'politics,'" she says. "It was a long haul that took talking with people, and education. But if leadership is invested in it and champions advocacy, it happens." Making advocacy part of the strategic plan made a huge difference. Collins adds that progress happens in incremental steps, as opposed to one big leap, and sometimes it is more of an iterative process than a straightforward path.
3. **Value and measure your ongoing educational work as well.** Habitat Newburgh believes it is important to educate volunteers and other partners throughout the year. This is part of the affiliate's strategic plan. It tracks how many times it did social media posts, or how many times it talked with people about an issue at coffee breaks. These are important opportunities to help people understand the importance of advocating for housing throughout the spectrum and to lay the groundwork for advocacy on any given issue.
4. **Be at the larger table.** Participation in the Newburgh Housing Coalition and state forums like the Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative has enabled Habitat to learn about new issues and be part of new conversations. It has informed their perspective and enabled better decisions. Dalton adds: "Advocacy isn't just about achieving your initial goals; when you do it, it influences the things you take on and helps you serve the community better. Be open to being influenced by the people around you."
5. **Make advocacy family-centered.** Collins believes that if she had said during the effort to get streetlights installed: "I need you to undertake an 'advocacy' action," the volunteers probably would not have gotten involved. Instead of presenting abstract advocacy opportunities, Collins and her staff work to find places where volunteers and homeowners can share their stories and compassion to help Habitat accomplish its mission.
6. **Advocacy can lead to unexpected opportunity.** The more Habitat Newburgh has "put itself out there," the more others have invited Habitat to participate in initiatives and asked its opinion on affordable housing issues, including elected officials and the press.

## Resources

- Corey Allen, Neighborhood Revitalization Coordinator, Habitat for Humanity of Greater Newburgh, [info@habitatnewburgh.org](mailto:info@habitatnewburgh.org).
- Newburgh Community Land Bank: [newburghcommunitylandbank.org](http://newburghcommunitylandbank.org).



270 Peachtree St. NW, Suite 1300, Atlanta, GA 30303-1246  
322 W. Lamar St., Americus, GA 31709-3543 USA  
(229) 924-6935 (800) HABITAT fax (229) 928-8811  
[publicinfo@habitat.org](mailto:publicinfo@habitat.org) [habitat.org](http://habitat.org)

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS AND ADVOCACY OFFICE:  
1310 L St. NW, Suite 350, Washington, DC 20005 USA  
(202) 239-4441 (800) HABITAT fax (202) 239-4472  
[advocacy@habitat.org](mailto:advocacy@habitat.org) [habitat.org/advocacy](http://habitat.org/advocacy)

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