

Report calls for ending guaranteed affordable housing for Washington, DC residents

Adam Soroka and Nick Barrickman
25 November 2014

An independent study of Washington DC's New Communities Initiative (NCI) found the city's premier sustainable housing program to be "overly optimistic" in its attempt to maintain affordable housing units in neighborhoods designated for renovation. At the onset of the harsh DC winter, the study calls for the elimination of new units of subsidized housing in the District of Columbia.

"Although a mix of incomes is desired in each of the neighborhoods, market-rate units with self-supporting rents are not feasible at this time in every neighborhood," say researchers for the outsourced management firm Quadel Consulting. The study cited a \$200 million shortfall in the required funding for the program to cover affordable housing. The report deems it impossible for the city government to continue the blight removal process without such assistance to the city's poor.

Seeking to justify city officials' reneging on promises to replace each torn-down living space with an equally affordable one, the report declares, "One for One Replacement does not mean that the unit mix of the demolished structures will be replicated in the new developments; it refers to the total number of replacement units produced."

The inability to offer low-income housing to the needy portends the shuffling of individuals and families from homeless shelter to homeless shelter, with no end to the cycle of poverty in sight.

City officials latched onto the report, with NCI Director Kimberly Black King stating that the recommendations of the firm reflect the "practical realities" of implementing a plan to guarantee affordable housing for the city's working population. She said that the city would offer vouchers to residents who would then move to other parts of the city.

The report comes just as city departments gear up for a major influx of homelessness in the coming winter months. A recently-published city report has cited expectations of a 16 percent increase in the homeless population, translating to roughly 840 additional individuals requiring shelter from the oncoming winter cold. This comes after months of steady increases in the homeless population. The summer months saw a 26 percent increase in the ranks of people without homes over the same period last year.

The year 2013 gave of a glimpse of the crisis for the DC shelter network. Over 700 families were placed in an abandoned hospital and overflow hotel rooms across the region including ones in Maryland and Virginia. At the time, the *Washington Post* reported a 100 percent increase in shelter requests over 2012. A recent report found that homelessness in the District increased by 13 percent between 2013 and 2014. Most of the newly-homeless were single mothers and their children.

Initiated in 2005 after the shooting of a 14-year-old girl in one of the District's crime-ridden neighborhoods, the New Communities Initiative (NCI) was meant to enact the policies of gentrification under the cover of redeveloping blighted areas of the city, while still allowing for a limited number of units to remain at affordable levels for low-income families. The NCI targets a number of blighted neighborhoods inside of Washington, DC in order to remove and redevelop them.

After nine years, however, only 490 of the promised 1,500 affordable units have been completed. Construction in each of the targeted four neighborhoods has stalled for various reasons, including city building restrictions, lack of available public land and the failure to generate any interest from private investors. A report by the DC-based think tank, Urban Institute, found that

between 2005 and 2012, the percentage of rental units under \$500 a month fell from 17 percent to 11.3 percent. Over the same time period, the proportion of rental units over \$1500 went from 14.9 percent up to 35.9 percent.

The findings by the report highlight the fraud perpetrated on the city's working population by consecutive Democratic Party administrations, which in the name of "rebuilding neighborhoods" blighted by poverty, have simply set out to remove the poorest sections of the population from the city's limits.

The funding gap faced by the NCI occurs within the context of rising social inequality in the District. Inequality in DC is among the sharpest worldwide. The top 20 percent of the population makes nearly 29 times the bottom 20 percent. The richest 5 percent earn roughly \$500,000 a year. The cost of living in the District is also among the highest in the country. A report by the Economic Policy Institute last year found that a two-parent family of four would need a combined yearly income of \$89,643 in order to live above the poverty threshold in the DC area.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact