

Guest column Herald-Times

Guest column: Housing is a Human Right

- By Deborah Myerson
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This guest column was written by Deborah Myerson, vice chair of the Monroe County Affordable Housing Advisory Commission.

“Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living ... including the right to housing.”

— Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

Seventy-one years ago, the U.S. led the world in shaping the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides, among other things, for housing as a human right. Yet, while the U.S. embraced “a decent home and suitable living arrangement for every American family” as a national goal in the 1949 Housing Act, a declared right to housing never fully took root.

All residents of Monroe County deserve a safe and habitable place to live. Unfortunately, this is also the most expensive housing market in Indiana. According to the 2010-14 American Community Survey, 24% of homeowners in Monroe County experienced a cost burden, spending more than 30% of their income on housing. In March 2019, there were only 73 homes throughout Monroe County priced under \$150,000 (out of 543 for sale) — a home price that would be affordable for many lower income households in our community.

An even more distressing situation exists for renters. Sixty-four percent of local renters were cost-burdened, including 47% of nonstudent households. In 2018, a renter would need to earn \$17.69 per hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment in Monroe County, according to the National Low-Income Housing Coalition’s “Out of Reach” report. Yet, the average renter locally earns only \$10.08 per hour.

The shortage of affordable housing generates many challenges. In addition to cost-burdened households lacking financial security, employers report difficulty with workforce attraction. Both traffic congestion and commute time increase as more people move outside of Monroe County in search of an affordable home.

We need to recognize housing as a human right in Monroe County. Such a declaration would provide an important foundation for policy measures that focus on the stability of the most vulnerable populations, support safe housing, prevent homelessness, address discrimination and ensure security of tenure to all.

Local governments are a key channel to establish housing as a human right in the United States. Several cities have already done so, including Berkeley, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland and San Francisco. In Wisconsin, the city of Madison and Dane County both recognized housing as a human right in 2011 with nonbinding resolutions. These resolutions called for city and county governments, surrounding municipalities, and community partners to work together to develop a housing plan and address housing issues in the region. The resolution also created momentum for Madison's 2014 Affordable Housing Initiative, which targeted creating 1,000 affordable housing units and committing \$20 million over a five-year period. By 2018, Madison had built 320 affordable units and over 800 more units were in the pipeline.

In April 2018, the Monroe County commissioners authorized the Affordable Housing Advisory Commission and appointed 11 members to keep community leaders apprised of issues and actions regarding county housing conditions, trends and needs and developing policy recommendations.

The Affordable Housing Advisory Commission believes that declaring a human right to housing is an essential statement of our community's values that can also strengthen future housing-related policies. In honor of National Fair Housing Month in April, we invite community members to join us in advocating for the local adoption of nonbinding resolutions recognizing housing as a human right. Please contact the Monroe County commissioners (as well leaders with the city of Bloomington, town of Ellettsville and town of Stinesville) to express your support. After all, everyone deserves a safe and secure place to live in peace and dignity.