



## **Early Action on the Student Housing Crisis**

**By Andy Mott**

### **Our Programs Identify a Shared Problem: Homeless Students**

A recent Community Learning Partnership (CLP) program committee meeting revealed the massive housing crisis which many students face, as program staff described students increasingly identifying affordable housing as one of their primary issues of concern. This led us to surface a number of creative ways in which CLP sites are responding to that crisis.

The program committee's conversation built on the disturbing findings of CLP's recent survey of nearly 200 students in community change studies courses across five cities in our network. Of these students, 15% reported that they were homeless or formerly homeless and close to 40% identified homelessness and affordable housing as among the issues they care about and want to do something about. Fifty-five percent of all the students said they will need additional financial aid if they are to graduate.

Studies show that one major reason for the high dropout rate in community colleges is the shortage of affordable housing for students. In 2014, over 56,000 U.S. college students were classified as "homeless" and this number counts only those students who are registered in homeless shelters or identify themselves as homeless. This figure has increased 75% over the last three years. It is part of a larger picture: there currently are 1.3 million homeless young people in the U.S. This is double the figure for 2008.

These figures do not reflect students who constantly move from one friend or relative to another, doubling up or sleeping on couches or on floors. They also don't reflect students whose rents require an extremely high percentage of the income they earn from part-time jobs.

### **Exploring Solutions**

We dug deeper by interviewing faculty and students at several CLP sites to learn what steps students, faculty-members and partner organizations are taking to try to alleviate this crisis. We found several examples of remarkable work under way while local, state and federal

governments completely ignore this severe crisis and the ways in which it undercuts the efforts of low-income students to earn college degrees and prepare for family-supporting careers.

A caveat: Each of these sites is unique. Each has different sets of skills and partners and those have been essential to the progress they've made on housing issues and the ideas they are exploring. Their work doesn't provide cookie-cutter solutions that others can easily replicate. Instead their stories provide ideas and suggest strategies which may be useful in another city, depending on local housing needs, student priorities, and the research, organizing, coalition-building and development finance experience which is available from local faculty, partners and students.

### **1) *Los Angeles – Researching and Publicizing the Problem While Searching for Solutions:***

Like others at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College, students in the Community Planning Program have desperate housing needs. Rents are sky-high and many students are homeless or have to double up or "couch surf" with friends and relatives. They desperately need new housing options as their housing problems threaten their ability to stay in school and graduate.

The situation is rapidly worsening throughout Los Angeles because of housing inflation and rampant gentrification, especially the expansion of Los Angeles' downtown past the Trade Tech campus and CDTech's headquarters into South Central LA. CDTech, a founding CLP partner organization, is an independent community-based nonprofit which provides faculty for the Community Planning Certificate program and works in coalition with many nonprofit partners. CD Tech has over twenty years experience working on neighborhood housing issues and now is turning to addressing the housing needs of its own students.

Shelia Balque, Program Coordinator of Student Services at CDTech, is working with the student Community Development Club on the housing issue. They are beginning by researching student housing needs and building their case for action. Students are developing a survey instrument with help from CD Tech staff, and student researchers at UCLA's Urban Planning School may also help.

The club-members plan to approach LA Trade Tech President Larry Frank and other college leaders requesting that their college require all students to complete the housing survey in January when they register for the new semester. The college-wide housing survey will give students and CDTech a full picture of how homelessness and other housing issues impact their students. This will enable them to make a strong case for action. Once this survey is complete, they also plan to approach students at other community and four-year public colleges throughout the LA District to urge them to conduct similar studies as background for making student housing a county-wide issue.

The students and faculty are also beginning to collaborate in researching possible options for increasing housing opportunities. They are consulting with community development corporations (CDCs) and others as they identify ways of increasing the supply of affordable student housing. Early in their research they have identified 600 units of luxury student rental housing at the University of Southern California that are vacant. As they explore other

possibilities, they will develop a strategy for trying to free up some or all of these units for LA Trade Tech students.

## **2) DeAnza College/San Jose – Organizing and Advocacy for Renters’ Rights:**

Thao Le, a student at DeAnza, is one of up to 40 students who are working with a coalition of groups that are fighting on housing issues in San Jose. This is where about half of DeAnza's students live. The San Jose Renters' Rights Coalition's members include Silicon Valley DeBug, the Affordable Housing Network of Santa Clara County, PACT (an affiliate of PICO, a national network of community organizing groups), Working Partnerships USA, and the Law Foundation of Silicon Valley.

Student involvement is encouraged by the requirement that they do community service for several courses in DeAnza's Certificate in Leadership and Social Justice curriculum, including Cynthia Kaufman's course on Critical Consciousness and Social Change and the political science courses.

Thao reports that San Jose is now the richest city in the country, "but we see the truth." There is massive gentrification and displacement and a great increase in homelessness. San Jose's median rents have doubled over five years while incomes have only gone up 11%. Average rents increased 13% last year and now average about \$2,500 a month. Studies show that a two bedroom apartment in metro San Jose now requires an annual income over \$100,000, which even many people employed in high tech jobs in Silicon Valley cannot afford.

Students commonly spend \$400-\$1000/month for housing. One friend of Thao’s spends 90% of her paycheck on housing.

San Jose has rent control, which limits annual rent increases to 8%. However, this restriction only covers apartments built before 1979 when the law was enacted. Furthermore, there is "vacancy decontrol" when tenants move out, leaving landlords free to raise rents to the market level. Decontrol gives landlords an enormous incentive to evict tenants so they can raise rents, and they currently do not have to show any justification for evicting a tenant.

The Renters’ Rights Coalition, including the students, has developed four principal demands in their campaign for a referendum on renters' rights. The proposed referendum would do the following:

1. Lower allowable rent increases to 2% from the current 8% per year.
2. Extend rent control to cover duplexes as well as apartments.
3. Enact a Just Cause Eviction statute, limiting evictions to tenants who have given their landlord just cause for evicting them.
4. Ban discrimination against tenants who receive Section 8 housing subsidies from the federal government.

The Mayor has established an Advisory Committee to study these demands. Advocates are concerned that this may be a scheme to shut down debate on the issues and they worry about the

stand the Committee will eventually take. While 50% of the Committee members are tenants, in reality the tenants cannot participate fully because they can't miss work, and the landlords who compose the other half of the Committee don't face the same obstacle, are very organized and are putting great pressure on local politicians.

The Coalition has researched the views of all the City's key officials and identified three Council-members and the Mayor as swing voters. DeAnza students are involved with others in a petition drive, including going door-to-door in pairs to organize tenants and their allies to add to pressure on these key politicians to approve holding the referendum. Many of the students speak Spanish or Vietnamese as well as English, so their involvement is especially helpful.

All the members of DeAnza's Student Government signed a letter inviting Chappie Jones, a key Councilman, to come to the campus and join a panel discussion on the four demands. Others on the panel include Professor Cynthia Kaufman and student leaders. The organizers expect the Student Government to pass a resolution in support of the students' demands.

### **3) *Minneapolis – Developing New Student Housing:***

In Minneapolis, Syd Beane, who coordinates the Minnesota Community Learning Partnership while also serving as CLP's Field Director, has been working for 18 months on a development approach to the housing crisis. In taking the lead on this, Syd is drawing from decades of experience with housing development as well as community organizing and teaching.

This has resulted in tentative plans for three housing development projects, one related to MCTC, the other two to Metropolitan State University, MCLP's other institutional partner. Progress may be more rapidly possible on the two developments related to Metro State, both of which would be mixed-use projects. They would combine student housing with space for classrooms and offices for Metro. Syd now chairs an Advisory Committee to the University's President and several students from the Community Development and Organizing Program have internships to support their involvement in the planning at Metro and MCTC.

Metro State cannot get state help for building dormitories because it's seen as a "college without walls" that doesn't need student residences. Nevertheless, the University sees the housing crisis many of its students face and wants to help alleviate this crisis. Furthermore, Metro State needs additional classroom and office space. The plan that has emerged responds to all these needs and opens up access to financing which would not be sufficient for projects that solely provide housing.

The main project, which Syd sees as a prototype for replication and which the President of Metro State supports, would start with 40 units of student family housing and 25,000 square feet of classroom space. The average student at Metro State is 32 years old, and many have families with children. While still in development, the plan that is emerging would depend for financing upon long-term leases with Metro State, and all the units would be for students with families. Such a project should be highly competitive for a tax credit that is available for affordable housing for families. (Unfortunately, there is no comparable support for housing for singles, including single students.)

Syd suggests that such a mixed-use family project has the potential to capture a set-aside of state bonding by the State Legislature. The committee therefore plans to seek support from friendly legislators for that part of the deal. A final element in exploration is that the Neighborhood Development Center -- a CDC which is one of Minneapolis-CLP's partners -- owns a good potential site near the light rail and convenient to Metro State. This site's location would not conflict with the Twin Cities' strong policies favoring dispersing low income housing throughout the metro area and steering resources away from neighborhoods of color.

The second project under consideration would be a large house costing about \$500,000 which would house a Native American Student Center as well as 4-8 units of student housing, including housing for singles. Several possible sites have been identified, with the Dayton's Bluff Neighborhood Housing Services working in partnership with Minneapolis-CLP and the American Indian Community Development Corporation.

Phoenix's Native American Connections, an anchor CLP partner there, recently sent its Director of Housing, Joe Keeper and others to the Twin Cities to explore these housing approaches. The mixed-use approach could fit particularly well with the fact that Native American Connections has development experience and owns twenty facilities throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area. It also has as several lots available for development and experience with development financing.

#### ***4) One Stop Resource and Referral Services for Students:***

Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) has a good one-stop Resource and Referral Center which helps connect students with supportive community networks, resources and opportunities. Many of its services involve students in helping other students through Students Against Hunger and Homelessness. Through direct service and referrals to outside agencies, the college helps students gain access, information and support to address specific needs, including help with housing as well as food, clothing, jobs, health care, accessing financial aid and other needs. They help students learn how to navigate the systems on and off campus, expanding their network of support.

The Center serves students who are: homeless or highly mobile; living in transitional housing, facing eviction; fleeing domestic violence in need of other types of support and advocacy or have no or limited income. Services include emergency shelter, supportive/transitional housing resources, a limited number of grants of either \$49 for one week in an emergency shelter or a larger amount to cover the first month's rent.

Similar centers at other colleges match students with roommates, make short-term loans to help them with housing emergencies, and enlist nearby homeowners as "housing hosts" who free up spare rooms for students.

However, it is clear from our research that even the best of these programs fall far short of meeting the real needs of students with limited incomes.

## **Conclusion: A Growing Crisis That Demands Attention**

There is a rapidly growing student housing crisis and increasing action by students and faculty associated with CLP to tackle it. The extent of the problem demonstrates both the need for major changes in public policy and the fact that it is not enough, for example, to make community college free as a way of addressing the economic challenges faced by students in our programs. There must also be major government initiatives to help students meet their housing and other living costs.

Currently, neither the federal government nor a single state or local government in the country is paying attention to this crisis. Furthermore, the problem goes unrecognized by most organizations concerned about homelessness or low-income housing. There are only 4,000 shelter beds for the 1.3 million homeless young people in the country. In Washington, DC, for example, there are only eight continuing shelter beds for homeless youth, and these are restricted to people under 18, and only available for a maximum of one year.

When Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia introduced a tiny step on this issue (a bill which would require colleges to develop plans for providing information on housing resources to their students), he was unable to get a single Republican co-sponsor or many Democratic backers.

As a network of community change studies programs, we are uniquely positioned to continue to raise this issue, and to explore and advocate for lasting solutions.

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