

More than 4,000 people in Roanoke need affordable housing

Housing vouchers have had a negative stigma for decades, but that has much more to do with disengaged landlords than it has to do with their tenants.

by [Isabel Thornton](#), December 19, 2023

Cardinal Way: Civility Rules encourages constructive dialogue on difficult issues. [You can participate in the project by filling out this survey that asks your views on development](#): Do you support construction of apartments in your locality? What about in your neighborhood? What advice would you offer elected leaders when evaluating development of green spaces?

Affordable housing is a problem everywhere. It's constantly in the news as one of the leading issues in large cities like Brooklyn or Alexandria and likewise treated as the root cause of broader societal concerns like health disparities and a lack of critical workforce. While Roanoke doesn't have the same competitive housing market as these larger cities, we still share the same need for safe, quality, affordable housing. Roanoke has an abundance of substandard housing, much of which is affordable, but which is neither dignified for residents nor in compliance with most building codes.

I am familiar with these living conditions as I've unfortunately seen them frequently in the last nine years as an affordable housing developer working in Roanoke's historic neighborhoods. I founded Restoration Housing largely as a reaction to these living conditions — with hopes to create dignified affordable housing through the restoration of blighted and vacant properties in our city's older neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have often lacked public and private investment for decades, resulting in more absentee landlords, blight, vacancy and subsequent crime, vandalism, and fires. In many of the properties that we see, if they have recently been occupied, the living conditions are abominable — often with exposed wires and dangerous electrical systems, lead paint chips, holes in the ceiling and floors, water damage, mold, inadequate heating and cooling, and severe structural hazards.

Restoration Housing is currently working on our fourth rehab in the Belmont neighborhood of Southeast, and we have been continuously amazed at just how many vacant, historic properties there are in this neighborhood (18% of the housing stock). You would assume that with that much vacancy, there would be endlessly available homes to purchase and rehab, but instead they are almost impossible to acquire. Many of the vacant properties that we encounter are owned by absentee landlords who have no incentive to sell, even when their property is condemned and facing multiple code violations (currently, building code violations are considered low-grade misdemeanors in Virginia and landlords seldom face more than a \$50 fine). As a result, these properties often end up being a source of extreme frustration for the city as they frequently attract squatters and further strain code enforcement, police and fire departments who help keep them secure. Unfortunately, there is lack of local power in code enforcement to do more about these violations, and a state bill introduced last year to help give Virginia localities more of this power was vetoed. **The original bill (HB 802) would allow localities to seek an injunction against a landlord with proven building code violations and ask for damages. This kind of authority would be such a critical resource for Roanoke as it could incentivize absentee landlords to either improve their properties or to sell.** I remain hopeful that this bill might resurface again next year with more support, which could have such a positive effect on our entire state's affordable housing stock.

And it isn't just nonprofits like us who are struggling to fill the housing void. All developers, whether market-rate or affordable, face obstacles trying to increase the number and type of available housing units. For example, by-right multifamily housing is scarcely available anywhere on our local zoning map. Our city's urban planners would love to make amendments that allow for more of it, but they face immense pushback, often unfounded and grounded in a dated fear of rental housing and its perceived negative effect on property values. As a fierce advocate for more flexible zoning in our city, I would encourage anyone reading to consider how their support on this topic could help shape important local changes. I would also encourage readers to explore [Housing Forward Virginia's Zoning Atlas](#) and the fantastic research they've done to illuminate the disparity of housing opportunities throughout our commonwealth. Without more flexible zoning, housing developers everywhere have extremely limited options for how they can build or rehab affordable units.

But if I could change just one thing to bring safe, quality, affordable housing to the Roanoke region, it would be to open the hearts and minds of our citizens to see the positive impact of Housing Choice Vouchers (once known as Section 8 and provided by the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority to help limited income individuals and families pay a fair market rent if their income can't afford it). These vouchers have had a negative stigma for decades that has much more to do with disengaged landlords than it has to do with their tenants. Our organization serves many families with these vouchers, and they are such a critical resource for them. They are hardworking families (in all cases with our properties they are single mothers and their children) that are not taking advantage of a system but are, in fact, struggling to make ends meet, and this resource allows them to live with dignity and hope where so many alternative housing options do not. What many people don't realize is 4,106 families have applied for Housing Choice Vouchers (in 2022) and are on the Housing Authority's waitlist. That means there are over 4,000 eligible individuals and families that need affordable housing in our locality. These vouchers come from the federal level but we can't expect our federal representatives to advocate for more of them if they don't see their constituents supporting them, advocating for them, and demanding them as a critical resource and not a burden to society.

To bring the kind of quality affordable housing to Roanoke, it takes changes from the local, state, and federal level. But these changes can't take place without beginning first with the citizens of Roanoke. We must collectively engage and advocate for more dignified housing in order for our representatives to see the critical mass of support for this issue and to help shape constructive policy for the future.

The mission of Restoration Housing is to develop affordable rental properties for the benefit of under-resourced communities through the rehabilitation and stewardship of the historic, built environment.