

Green Affordable Homes

Valuing Healthy and Efficient Housing for All



CAMPAIGN BRIEF U.S. GREEN BUILDING COUNCIL

Everyone deserves to live in a truly affordable home. USGBC is focused on attaining green buildings for all within this generation by expanding access to the benefits of healthy, efficient, and affordable housing. An unhealthy home with high operating costs due to inefficiency in energy and water consumption is not affordable. These basic outcomes of the green building process should be accessible to all.



Currently, high utility bills are pervasive in the affordable housing. Indeed, low-income households spend on average 19.5% of annual income on home energy costs, while the average for median-income households is just 4.6%.¹ These vulnerable households are often comprised of children, seniors, and persons with chronic disabilities. For this demographic, high utility bills are a serious problem, but asthma, allergies, and other chronic problems that can be exacerbated by exposure to toxins in the built environment can be matters of life and death. Extending the benefits of efficient, healthy buildings should not be an option.

Support green affordable housing through policy.

USGBC's green building community has long been active in building affordable green homes. During 2011, 60% of the homes that certified using the LEED for Homes program were identified as affordable projects and nearly half of all the LEED certified homes in existence today provide affordable housing.² Green buildings for all people is one of the core values held by USGBC, memorialized in its [Guiding Principles](#), and put to work in its [Strategic Plan](#). This campaign to promote green affordable housing seeks to achieve these goals through advocacy of smart policy changes.

Green building advocates can drive greater momentum behind healthy, efficient, and affordable housing by starting the conversation with state housing finance agencies (SHFAs) and the owners and developers of affordable housing projects. The SHFA develops a "Qualified Allocation Plan" (QAP) for affordable housing projects seeking to attain Low Income Housing tax Credits (LIHTC). These QAPs define how applications for LIHTC money will be evaluated – and developers seeking this money must earn high marks against these criteria in order to compete for these funds.

In almost all states, a handful of green building attributes have worked their way into QAPs, demonstrating an initial interest in ensuring healthy and efficient homes for low-income families. As USGBC and its community continue to demonstrate how green buildings can enable healthy homes that cost less to operate while also reducing the strain on natural resources and the environment, it is increasingly evident that there is so much more to do.

Nearly every state QAP can be improved to more equitably extend the many benefits of green homes to low income families. As of 2010, QAPs in only 16 states referenced recognized third-party green building rating systems or programs like LEED or Enterprise Green Communities.³ These ratings and programs can be very helpful references in QAPs, given the success that these beyond-code, third-party verified, green building rating systems continue to demonstrate in engaging developers to design and build green homes and housing that are more energy and water efficient, that have healthier indoor air, that reduce waste and that – importantly – save homeowners and tenants money.

¹ "The Cold Facts: The First Annual Report on the Effect of Home Energy Costs on Low-income Americans." National Fuel Funds Network, National Low-income Energy Consortium, National Energy Assistance Directors' Association. 2002. <http://www.nliec.org/facts.pdf>

² For more information on LEED for Homes and LEED for Homes projects visit www.USGBC.org/Homes, or contact Homes@usgbc.org.

³ Global Green USA's, [Green Building Criteria in 2008 State Low Income Housing Tax Credit Programs](#)



Bring Green Affordable Housing to Your State

Green building advocates can play a variety of roles in supporting the greening of existing and future affordable housing projects. One-size-fits-all solutions are rare, and as such, convening important stakeholders and perspectives is key to identifying workable solutions. Specifically, concentrate advocacy efforts in the following ways:

- **Initiate Conversations:** The main target for this campaign is the State Housing Finance Agency, so advocates should identify appropriate contacts within the agency to find out what they are doing to encourage green building now. If they do not have a green building section in their QAP, ask why not, and help them work to create one. If they do, take a look and make sure it adequately encourages and rewards today's best green building practices by at least referencing LEED and Green Communities.
- **Listen to the implementers:** Developers of affordable housing projects, especially those that want to showcase their green building expertise, should be strong allies in greening the QAP. Determine who the most active affordable housing developers are in your state. What is their perspective? They may need additional information, insights and educational offerings from the green building community to more fully embrace a green affordable housing portfolio.
- **Find out where affordable housing is happening:** Targeting advocacy activities on affordable homes should be selective and aimed at where affordable housing projects are being built. Are green affordable housing units being built? If so, what's driving it? Check out the main database to find out this information, [HUD's HOME Program](#), to help identify targeted areas.
- **Keep Decision Makers Informed:** Well-informed decision makers with a supportive constituency may be the most effective engine in driving change. Keep them up to date on green affordable housing activity, and offer them opportunities for action and to celebrate progress.



The Role of Policy Makers

In any advocacy campaign, policy makers make strong allies. Resolutions, especially from state legislatures, supporting the inclusion of green building criteria in a QAP, are powerful conversation starters and can help take affordable housing activity to the next level. See [here](#) for draft legislative text.

Resources

- **Enterprise Community Partners:** Enterprise has created and maintains a variety of resources for those looking to green their QAP. Enterprise maintains an [interactive map](#) that links to all the state QAPs as well as a [database](#) of the green or somewhat green attributes found in each.
- **Global Green USA's 2010 report:** [Green Building Criteria in Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Programs](#)
- **Green Affordable Housing Policy Toolkit:** Enterprise has also developed the excellent Green Affordable Housing Toolkit that answers many of the frequently asked questions around green affordable housing.⁴
- **The Michigan Green QAP:** The state of Michigan has an [excellent QAP](#) that includes green criteria in the assessment of applicants for low income housing tax credits.
- USGBC's [draft legislative text](#) for state or local governments to support green affordable housing.
- News and resources from the [Green Affordable Housing Coalition](#).

For more information on USGBC's *Value Healthy and Efficient Affordable Housing* campaign, contact Matt Pearce, Campaign Specialist, at mpearce@usgbc.org. For more information on USGBC's advocacy campaigns, visit www.usgbc.org/campaigns.

⁴ Green Affordable Housing Toolkit, <http://www.practitionerresources.org/cache/documents/673/67398.pdf>