

## **One Community's Spiritual Journey towards Affordable Housing for All**

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax (UUCF) has demonstrated a remarkable commitment to working for affordable housing for everyone in our county – particularly for the lowest income populations and the homeless. The Oakton congregation of nearly 700 members is guided by its mission to “*transform the world through acts of love and justice.*”

### **The Catalyst: Hypothermia Sheltering**

UUCF, along with other faith communities, has participated in countywide hypothermia sheltering since 2006. The direct personal experience of meeting the homeless was transformative for the hundred- some members who joined in the volunteer effort. They began to see the homeless as human beings, “just like you and me,” as one member noted, “only sadder.” They began to ask what they needed to do so they wouldn’t have to go through this every year. Hypothermia sheltering provided the catalyst for further action. In 2006 my congregation passed a resolution pledging to work to end homelessness in Fairfax County.

While hypothermia sheltering was necessary to save lives, the long term solution required increasing the supply of affordable housing. A task force was formed to develop and coordinate an action plan, with separate working groups focusing on different aspects of the problem. The Task Force aims to show the interconnection between these activities and educate the congregation on the issues. The Task Force is represented on the congregation’s social justice council, and through that maintains accountability to the board. The Task Force’s leadership team consists of a representative from each of the working groups. They meet bi-monthly and keep in touch by e-mail in between.

### **Hands-on, Not Hand Wringing: Direct Service, Fundraising, and Advocacy**

#### Direct Service

Hundreds of congregants started on their volunteer work building a Habitat for Humanity house in Fairfax. They continue through participation in Rebuilding Together, a day-long home repair project for a family in need, coordinated by RPJ Housing. And for the past three winters, for one week the congregation’s community space is transformed into a shelter providing warm food, fellowship and a safe place to sleep for the homeless. In addition, a team of volunteers mentors a family in transitional housing to help them achieve independence.

#### Fund Raising

In addition to funding the Habitat project and Rebuilding Together, UUCF partnered with FACETS, a local non-profit service provider, to fund supportive housing for a family of four for two years. Additional resources were raised for FACETS’ permanent supportive housing program for homeless single adults. Annually UUCF designates a month where 1/3 of the Sunday collection is donated to a non-profit to support affordable housing. The

congregation and individual members also have investments and donations in the Open Door Housing Fund, a local Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) with roots in the Unitarian Universalist community that finances affordable housing in the region.

### Advocacy

The congregation recognized that ending homelessness would require supportive public policy and adequate public resources, and has made advocacy a core activity. They work to counter NIMBYism, attend public hearings, testify before boards, and launch petition drives. They meet regularly with supervisors to voice their support for ending homelessness and funding affordable housing. They helped to found Communities of Faith United for Housing (CFUH), a county-wide interfaith organization whose mission is to increase the supply of affordable housing, with a special focus on providing permanent housing for those who are either homeless or dangerously close to becoming homeless. CFUH advocates for full implementation of the County's 10 year plan to end homelessness and for the annual budget resources to make that a reality.

UUCF has also joined Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement (VOICE) another advocacy group that supports affordable housing.

Many faith communities act out their vision for justice by serving the poor and the defenseless. UUCF's innovation is to use that service as the educational and organizing tool to promote a systematic approach to addressing the problem of homelessness. At UUCF, whether one's inclination is direct service, advocacy, or writing a check, a single work day or a long series of committee meetings, there's a way to serve.

For more information about UUCF see: <http://www.uucf.org/> and click on "social justice" in the left-hand column, or contact Renee Jakobs at [Renee20191@Yahoo.com](mailto:Renee20191@Yahoo.com)