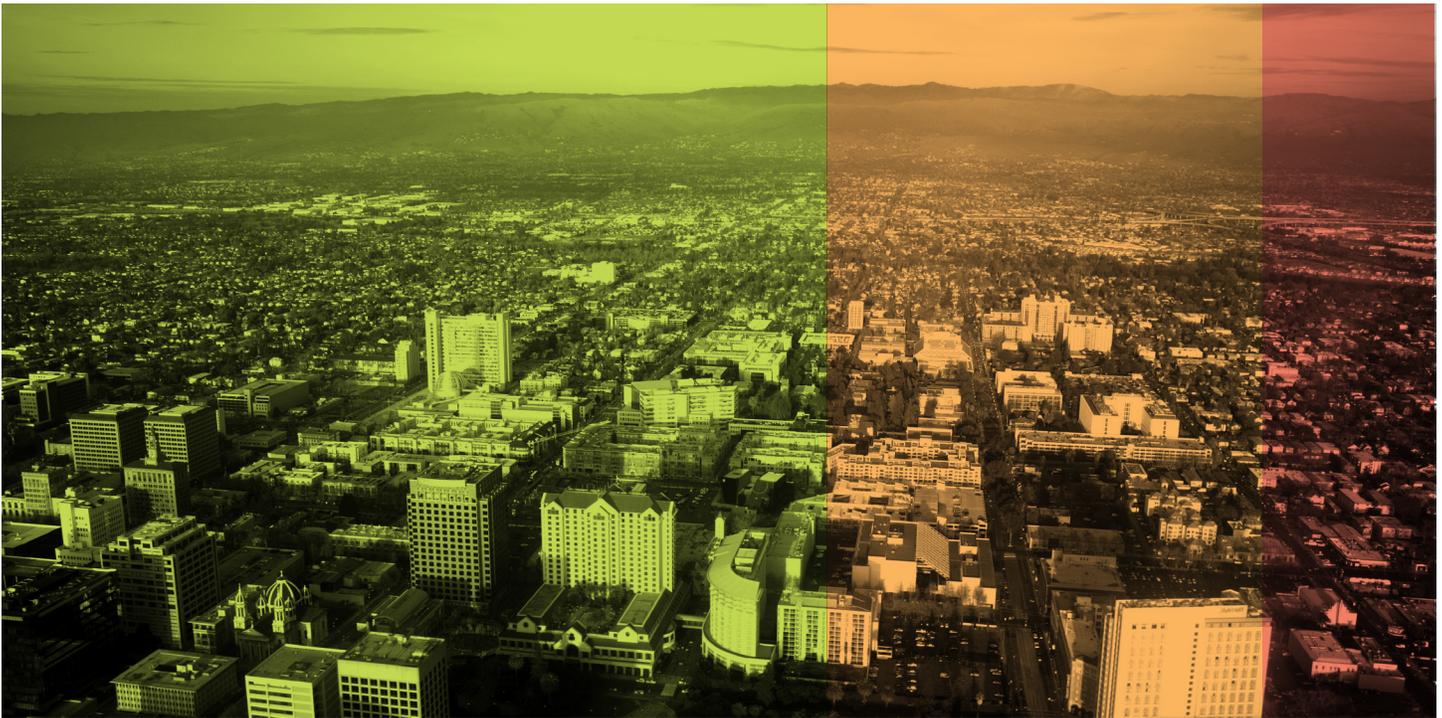


Advocating For Equity in California's Housing Crisis


Convergence
Partnership

PolicyLink

August 2021



PolicyLink serves as the program director for the Convergence Partnership, helping to develop and implement the plans and actions necessary to ensure that all people can live in healthy communities of opportunity.

In 2018 the Convergence Partnership provided grants to seven organizations to advocate for solutions that create equitable changes for diverse communities across the country. These profiles include stories that capture the experiences and impacts of this work from the perspectives of the community members, grassroots and community organizations, and funder partners involved.

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by **Lifting Up What Works**®.

www.policylink.org

California's Long Struggle Over Housing Costs

California is experiencing an acute housing crisis. Nearly 50 percent of California households are currently renters and more than 56 percent of these households pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing, the definition of rent burden. The situation is worse for California's low-income renters and renters of color: 84 percent of households at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line pay too much for housing, and almost 60 percent of Black and Latinx households in the state pay too much for housing, versus less than half of White households.¹

California's struggles over housing are decades old. One important chapter unfolded in 1995, when the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act passed into law, limiting local rent control ordinances in the state. As rents surged over the following decades, tenants' rights groups and other housing advocates pressed for a repeal of the law, to no avail.

Tenacious as Costa-Hawkins has proved to be, it was not indestructible. In 2016, five cities in Northern California put measures for rent control and "just cause for evictions" on the ballot, and two cities passed the measures. That was the first time since Costa-Hawkins that municipalities had seen an expansion of rent regulation and eviction protections for tenants.

Those victories didn't come out of nowhere, says Amy Schur, campaign director of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (or ACCE, pronounced like "ace"). "Leading up to the vote in 2016, and since then, there's been a resurgence of the tenants' rights movement," says Schur, whose grassroots group has 15,000 members around the state. Among the members are a large number of people most affected by housing costs—including low-income Black and Latinx people. "At ACCE, we're clear that many of our struggles are intersectional. Housing justice impacts all of our constituencies, and so we reach out to organizations that don't have housing justice as a focus, but recognize that it's a concern," such as organized labor and organizations involving low-wage workers and immigrants.

"There is no shortage of knowledge about what kinds of policies we need" to achieve greater housing justice, says Schur. "Unless we organize communities most impacted," she says, "we won't see policies that provide housing justice." ACCE is part of a statewide network of housing advocates and racial equity groups that are working together to coordinate their housing justice efforts both locally and statewide under the banner of the "Miyako Group." Funding from the Convergence Partnership in 2018 and 2019 supported the Miyako Group's narrative strategy and their base-building efforts to connect different advocates and residents across the state.² These efforts launched with a major strategy gathering in August 2018. Tenant organizers, community-based organizations, faith groups, policy institutions, researchers, legal service groups, nonprofit developers, and others attending the Miyako gathering affirmed their commitment to racial and economic equity and to working together.

Building a Base

Organizers throughout California have tackled housing issues. In the early 2010s, voters in Los Angeles County supported two measures to put \$160 billion into transit. With 88 cities in LA County, that would mean lots of planning around transit and land use. New development projects would be sprouting up fast around transit hubs.

In a less intense housing market, what might happen normally is that, for example, a rail company would propose building a new line, and local organizations would campaign for "community benefits"—a health clinic or a certain number of low-income housing units. But LA County's situation was not normal. "Our member organizations knew that things were changing rapidly," says Laura Raymond, director of the Alliance for Community Transit-Los Angeles (ACT-LA), a coalition of 36 community groups around the county. Raymond's coalition wanted to get the maximum community benefits for each new project. "Given the fast pace of development, our members decided we needed to work not just on a project-by-project basis, but also regionally."

That decision led ACT-LA to help get a ballot measure in front of voters in November 2016. Measure JJJ would require a certain amount of affordable housing units near any new transit development. The exact number of units was tied to the density of the development, and there was a focus on extremely low-income units. "And we won!" Raymond exclaims. After the victory, ACT-LA battled a repeal measure and now is working to get environmental justice, parks equity, and other features written into the community plans. That's complicated work, as the City of Los Angeles has 35 community plans.

But their work was still not done. In 2018, State Senator Scott Wiener introduced "a bill that would have erased what we'd won," says Raymond. On the surface, SB 827 sounded good, as it encouraged more building near transit stations. "The problem was, there was nothing in the bill about equity," Raymond explains. "It would have removed any local requirements for developers to include affordable housing."

ACT-LA rallied some 40 groups to sign a letter detailing their opposition to the bill, saying, in part, that it "will not achieve its stated goals of combatting exclusionary zoning, will increase speculation, accelerate displacement, and make it harder to build what we need around transit." The letter encouraged

Wiener and others who care about housing and transit to instead spark an inclusive dialogue “aimed at making transit-rich neighborhoods places where all residents can prosper.”

At a committee meeting, ACT-LA’s member groups and allies showed up in force, and another senator referred to their letter during the meeting. SB 827 died in committee, but the idea behind it survived. At the end of 2018, Wiener introduced a revised bill, SB 50, that incorporated input from ACT-LA and, to their dismay, from developers. Still, Raymond says, “It’s progress. You can see where community groups have power.”

Turning People Power Into Change

Housing issues have long been at the forefront of California politics, but they have heated up notably in recent years, as demonstrated by the work of ACCE and ACT-LA. Many communities are struggling for solutions. In the wake of local victories in 2016, housing justice advocates felt they had the momentum to take another run at reversing Costa-Hawkins’ statewide limits on rent control. They decided on repeal as a big 10-year goal. By 2018, a major election year in the state, advocates had helped get a measure on the ballot for a public vote. Proposition 10 would allow local governments to adopt rent control on any type of housing, thus repealing the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act.

“Prop 10 yielded an unprecedented—in my career—level of organizing around it. It also sparked a number of local rent control ballot measures,” says Richard Marcantonio, a 30-year veteran of justice issues and a managing attorney at Public Advocates. The purpose of all this organizing, he says, is to “bring local groups and residents into the shaping of state policy.”

During the August 2018 strategy meeting, Miyako Group members decided to focus on what they called the “three P’s”:

- **Protect people from displacement**—help stop the displacement resulting from rent increases, freeway expansion, or lack of tenant protections.
- **Preserve existing homes**—pursue strategies to make sure that existing housing stock is affordable, properly maintained, and affordable.
- **Produce affordable housing**—create new affordable housing for low- and moderate-income people who are not served by the high-end housing that developers often pursue.

“We had done alright on protection,” says Marcantonio, citing local victories on rent control. The goal of protecting people from displacement is an urgent and ongoing need, as tenants find themselves at risk on new fronts all the time. “However, we had ceded the ground on production,” he adds, which is why it became a major topic to tackle at the convening.

Among the group’s opponents on housing production were NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) activists, typically people from wealthy residential communities who did not want affordable housing built near them. An even more significant source of opposition came, ironically, from a group called “California

YIMBY”—for “yes in my backyard.” The real estate-aligned group pushed for more housing production; however, even as they used the language of making California more “affordable and inclusive,” they did not support measures for equity or low-income housing.

Housing justice advocates pushed a different narrative, that the market itself was the problem. They pointed a finger at “the billionaire investor class” who helped create the housing crisis, says Marcantonio. Rallying around a slogan of “The rent is too damn high,” housing advocates left the August Miyako convening with ever-greater energy.

Sam Tepperman-Gelfant, an attorney with Public Advocates, asserts the importance of grassroots organizing. “We’ve done a lot of work that’s not related to a particular campaign,” he says, “but that has helped build connections among people and organizations that has set the stage for better policy. It doesn’t play well in a story to say, ‘We had quarterly meetings.’ But, the interpersonal work is so important.”

As the 2018 elections neared, Prop 10 polling showed that it would lose badly. The measure was defeated about 60-40 on November 6, which is better than the 65-35 split that some early polls had predicted. “The loss could have taken the wind out of people’s sails. But the movement came out of Prop 10 all fired up,” says Schur of ACCE, ticking off a list of victories: Connections were made with tens of thousands of sympathetic voters. Extensive follow-up is keeping supporters active. A dramatic increase occurred in the number of state legislators supporting rent control. Endorsements for Prop 10 were made by major groups like the California Democratic Party and the state building and construction trades.

“We figured we would lose,” says Schur. “But as long as we built power for the movement, it’s not a long-term loss, it’s just a short-term policy defeat.” The movement helped change how people talked about housing. Whereas previously the dominant narrative was to just build more housing regardless of equity, now pundits and decision-makers were articulating the need to protect tenants while also building new housing. The slogan “The rent is too damn high” captured people’s attention. All this, in spite of the fact that Prop 10 opponents had [outspent](#) its supporters almost three to one.

“After Prop 10, the question was how do we transfer all that grassroots energy into the larger fight for tenant protections and affirmative housing production,” says Marcantonio of Public Advocates.

With the housing crisis growing ever worse, a bill to cap rent increases—or what its author, Assemblymember David Chiu, called an “anti-rent-gouging” bill—was introduced and, throughout 2019, wended its way through state legislative committees and public discussion. In September 2019, the bill passed. The Tenant Protection Act, as it is called, limits rent increases to 5 percent per year plus the consumer price index, but no more than 10 percent annually. It also contains a provision that requires landlords to have “just cause” to evict a tenant, such as failure to pay rent.

As major as the Tenant Protection Act victory is, it is not the end of the fight. Advocates will be working to build on the victory in coming years, both at the state and local levels. Rent caps and other tenant protections are only one part of a three-part strategy; the statewide coalition continues to push for preservation of existing housing and production of new housing—all with a commitment to equity written into the law.

Continuing the Fight

Convergence Partnership support enabled the vital base-building work that groups like ACCE, ACT-LA, and Public Advocates have done on housing equity.

“Many funders ask, ‘Why should I support a coalition when I can just fund all these local groups instead?’” says Raymond of ACT-LA. It is essential to fund the local groups, she says, because they are the ones that have the tightest relationships in their communities. “But coalitions mean you can better coordinate work on a regional or state level.”

What’s more, advocates say, housing issues cross county borders and geographical boundaries. Developers reach into all corners of California. People migrate to where they can afford to live. Homeless people respond to climate and living conditions. If people and issues cross borders, so too must housing justice groups.

“We need to fight the air war, with great messaging—especially in a statewide campaign,” says Schur of ACCE. “But that’s a complement to community organizing”—the ground war. “It’s one thing to win an immediate policy fight by whatever means are most efficient, but it’s another thing to build power for the long term.”

Even as they were vastly outspent by opponents, the coalition did well in the “air war” on Prop 10, partly with its slogan “The rent is too damn high.” That message was successful not solely because it was pithy and a little provocative, but because it was the product of extensive grassroots organizing. Local communities throughout the state took it on because they had helped create it in the first place.

It wasn’t just the money that mattered to partner organizations in California; the Convergence Partnership’s commitment to racial equity was also important. “Our membership base is low-income communities and communities of color,” says Schur. The challenge they faced was how to broaden the statewide coalition while retaining their commitment to their base and to racial equity. With support and encouragement from the Convergence Partnership, “I feel that we’re threading that needle,” says Schur, “both through our formal structures and our political education.”

Acknowledgments

Convergence Partnership would like to thank [Working Narratives](#) for developing this profile, especially Paul VanDecarr, Nick Szuberla, and Mik Moore ([Moore + Associates](#)).

The Partnership would also like to extend deep appreciation to the following partners for contributing their valuable time, experiences, and insights to these stories:

- Amy Schur, [Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment](#)
- Laura Raymond, [ACT-LA \(Alliance for Community Transit, Los Angeles\)](#)
- Richard Marcantonio, [Public Advocates](#)
- Sam Tepperman-Gelfant, [Public Advocates](#)

Notes

- 1 National Equity Atlas, “Connectedness,” PolicyLink and the USC Equity Research Institute, formerly the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, accessed October 2020, <https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators#Connectedness>.
- 2 Although elements of this story include legislative advocacy, Convergence Partnership funding was not used for any lobbying-related activities.



Lifting Up What Works®

Headquarters

1438 Webster Street
Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94612
t 510 663-2333
f 510 663-9684

Communications

75 Broad Street
Suite 701
New York, NY 10004
t 212 629-9570

Washington, DC

1301 K Street, NW
Suite 300 W-414
Washington, DC 20005

policylink.org

Facebook: /PolicyLink
Twitter: @policylink
Instagram: @policylink