

# New Policy Directions for Sustainable, Affordable Housing

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Philadelphia has many treasured holiday traditions, like the Macy's Holiday Light Show (formerly Wanamaker's), plus some new destinations, like the hot restaurants and cool boutiques on revitalized 13th Street. This area has one new neighbor you might not have seen: an affordable housing development.

Tucked away down an alley behind the St. John's Church on 13th Street just south of Market, is Connelly House, a design award-winning, LEED-certified building — LEED is an internationally recognized green building certification system — which will provide 79 units of affordable, permanent housing and on-site services for formerly homeless individuals with special needs. Peeking down the alley behind the church, you may not notice the building, which blends seamlessly into the adjacent architecture of the Loews Hotel and the rear façade of 1234 Market St..

At this time of year, we are reminded of the less fortunate. Connelly House will give its residents easy access to public transportation and additional needed services. Regional Housing Legal Services (RHLS) provided extensive legal and technical assistance to Project H.O.M.E. and Bethesda Project, co-sponsors of Connelly House, to help make Connelly House a reality.

Like Connelly House, the work of RHLS is often hidden from view, as its clients garner public accolades. However, the comprehensive services RHLS provides to nonprofit, community-based developers are critical to ensuring that our clients are able to provide affordable housing and supportive services to those with urgent needs.

RHLS is a nonprofit law firm with unique expertise in affordable, sustainable housing and its related components — community and economic development, utility matters and preservation of home ownership. RHLS provides innovative project and policy solutions that help create sustainable communities offering decent, safe and affordable housing for lower-income Pennsylvanians. We work in five main areas: development services, public policy, Pennsylvania Utility Law Project, HEMAP Help Center and Housing Law Project. You can learn more about each of these areas by visiting [www.rhls.org](http://www.rhls.org).

Some of the highlights of our last fiscal year include:

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- Worked on more than 77 development projects throughout the state, indirectly assisting 1,630 low-income households, 177 senior households and 109 households for people with disabilities.
- Provided assistance to homeowners facing foreclosure through our Homeowners Emergency Mortgage Assistance Program (HEMAP) Help Center, providing individualized feedback on draft HEMAP applications to more than 300 households.
- Secured dedicated weatherization funding for affordable multifamily housing.
- Co-sponsored a first-of-its-kind Transit-Oriented Development forum in the Philadelphia region.
- Successfully advocated for federal funding for mortgage foreclosure prevention programs that resulted in an allocation of nearly \$106 million to fund Pennsylvania's HEMAP. This additional funding could provide HEMAP loans to more than 9,000 Pennsylvania homeowners, helping them avoid foreclosure and preventing further destabilization of families and communities

RHLS and its clients create sustainable communities focused on "promoting energy-efficiency, connecting housing to jobs, increasing access to affordable transportation, supporting educational opportunity, and making homes healthier."

## **Transit-Oriented Development**

On April 1, RHLS held a forum — Creating a Vibrant Region through Transit-Oriented Development — featuring a keynote address by Shelley Poticha, senior adviser, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities. More than 100 developers, government officials, planners and nonprofits from around the region attended to learn about HUD's sustainability principles from Poticha and to hear other panelists discuss how the Philadelphia region can access new funding for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD).

In 2010, RHLS assumed management of the TOD Initiative, which was created by NeighborhoodsNow with the goal of shaping policy and promoting projects that take advantage of one of Philadelphia's greatest assets: its public transit system. Although SEPTA is the fifth largest regional public transportation network in the United States, development around transit stations in low-income neighborhoods is stymied by zoning limitations, undesirable existing land uses and safety concerns. While much has been accomplished toward removing these barriers, RHLS continues to collaborate with local, state and national partners to remove barriers to TOD and improve the way municipalities approach development in and around transit stations throughout the region to benefit low-income communities.

Although legislation creating a TOD Zoning Overlay was passed by Philadelphia City Council in December 2009, additional changes are expected with the current overhaul of the Philadelphia Zoning Code. The current proposal would modify the zoning code to provide development

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incentives, such as fewer required parking spaces and increased density in highlighted transit-oriented overlay areas, which is anticipated to include all of Center City.

We are currently working with several clients planning TOD projects in Philadelphia. For example, RHLS client Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha Inc. (APM) is working with the Jonathan Rose Companies to seek funding for about 150 units of mixed-income housing with retail and community spaces on the ground level. The property is located at Ninth and Berks streets, on the east side of the Temple Regional Rail Station, currently a PGW parking lot. This project is also expected to incorporate many green elements, including green roofs.

## **Multifamily Weatherization**

There is a significant need to weatherize and improve the energy efficiency of the multifamily affordable housing portfolio in the Philadelphia area as a means of preserving the availability of housing for low- and lower-income residents.

In early 2009, RHLS helped form the Philadelphia Weatherization and Conservation Collaborative (PWCC), a public and private collaborative of more than 25 organizations. PWCC strategizes ways to advocate for the funding of weatherization for multifamily affordable housing properties.

To date, PWCC has been able to:

- Play a major role in successfully advocating for over \$21 million to be set aside for weatherization of affordable multifamily properties in Pennsylvania.
- Assist in identifying potential grantees.
- Educate property owners about how to access federal weatherization funding.
- Secure a commitment from a public utility to support a local weatherization pilot project with an investment of up to \$200,000.
- Initiate discussions with a public utility regarding implementing a coordinated approach to energy efficiency improvements in Philadelphia neighborhoods.

While significant weatherization funds have been set aside for affordable multifamily properties, there are still policy obstacles and systemic challenges preventing local property owners from accessing available funds. RHLS is actively working to identify and remove the barriers to full utilization of the funds.

RHLS is committed to advocating for systems change and supporting sustainable affordable housing projects like Connelly House. Without Connelly House, more people would be living on the streets or in substandard housing. In the current challenging environment, we all need to

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support funding for affordable housing, transit-oriented development, and energy efficiency, all of which will support sustainable communities for the residents of Philadelphia. •

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