



HOME
Housing Opportunities Made Equal

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WESTERN NEW YORK'S SOURCE FOR FAIR HOUSING NEWS

Vol. 58 No. 4 • WINTER 2021

INSIGHT



ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO HOUSING IN NEW YORK

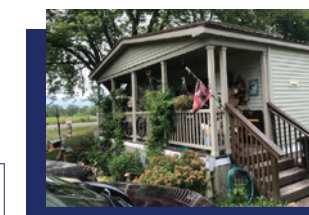
HOME
Housing Opportunities Made Equal

By Chris Allaire

“This program gave me my freedom back, you guys gave me my life back” is what Tina Blake told me on a recent call when I asked how HOME’s modification project has affected her life. “Now I can be independent, get out by myself. I am able to go to the porch, get the mail. All kinds of things. Without this there was no way I could make any [medical] appointments of any kind. I was literally house bound.” Ms. Blake was able to gain her mobility back with the help of HOME’s Eliminating Barriers to Housing in New York (EBHNY) program.



Batavia project: after



Batavia project: before

EBHNY is a two-year pilot program designed to remove barriers to housing choice throughout the State of New York. The EBHNY program is funded by settlement payments secured by the New York State Attorney General’s Office from major mortgage lenders over fraud and misconduct that contributed to the housing and foreclosure crisis of the 2000s. HOME is one of six agencies in the state that received funding through this program, and we were given the latitude to develop projects that would have a significant impact on our community. As a result, we designed our program to address critical areas of housing need and to respond to service gaps in Western New York. To achieve this goal, HOME focused its efforts on three main programmatic pillars: fair housing enforcement, education and outreach, and accessibility modification.

The real power behind any fair housing enforcement is an organization’s ability to go out into the community and conduct investigations of housing providers. The EBHNY program has allowed HOME to broadly expand our systemic investigation capacity and focus on sites outside of the large population areas of Buffalo and Niagara Falls—while still conducting investigations in these areas. This program alone nearly doubled our investigatory capacity, allowing us to map and investigate larger housing providers in our region in a way that focuses on rural communities throughout Erie, Niagara, Chautauqua, and Genesee counties. HOME also coupled our enforcement efforts with a robust educational program intended to inform tenants, landlord, and human service providers about fair housing laws in New York State.

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Published through the generous support of contributors to HOME

FAIR HOUSING EDUCATION THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

By Steven Haagsma

Prior to March 2020, I regularly attended 15 to 20 in-person events each month, including resource fairs, fair housing workshops, and other events. From March 2020 to June 2021, that number was zero. Fortunately, in the summer of 2021 a number of outdoor resource fairs and similar events were able to be held, allowing me to talk to people about HOME’s services in person again. But it wasn’t until mid-October that I was finally able to conduct in-person fair housing workshops again.

HOME has long partnered with Buffalo Public Schools’ Adult Education division to provide fair housing information to students in their English as a Second Language and High School Equivalency classes. Students in those classes would often tell me that they hadn’t known that what their landlord was doing was illegal, much less that there was something they could do about it. These in-person interactions, where information about fair housing and HOME’s services is so needed and makes a tangible difference in people’s lives, have always been one of the most rewarding aspects of my job as Education Specialist. Losing the ability to connect with people face-to-face due to the pandemic was a big challenge. While we continued to provide educational services during the pandemic with webinars and other virtual events, it just wasn’t the same.

Fortunately, with BPS Adult Education classes being held in person again this fall semester, I was again invited to talk about fair housing and HOME’s services. While the experience isn’t the same when everyone is wearing a mask, it’s been refreshing to finally interact with people in person again. While the year-long hiatus may have made my job slightly less rewarding, the true harm was that fair housing information was not relayed to many of those who most needed it. Many people I’ve spoken with in these classes over the past few months seemed relieved to hear that the housing problems they’re experiencing are shared by others and that they can fight back when they are being taken advantage of or treated unfairly.

Discussing fair housing issues with over 120 people in nearly 20 classes has not only empowered people to stand up for themselves but has also furthered HOME’s mission to ensure that everyone in Western New York has access to the housing and communities of their choice.

While the pandemic’s effects on the economy, public health, and fair housing are far from over, HOME’s partnership with BPS Adult Education has ensured that many more people are able to access the information and services they need to find and keep stable housing during this difficult time.

HOME HOSTS SECOND ANNUAL ONLINE AUCTION

By Hannah Luterek

While 2021 did not allow for HOME to host our Annual Dinner, we were able to hold our Give Me Shelter: Online Auction once again. From October 11 to October 16, guests were able to bid and go head-to-head on auction items virtually.

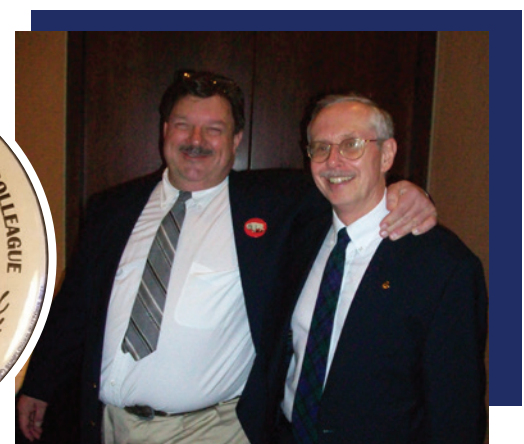
Because of the generosity of local businesses, board members, and HOME staff and volunteers, we were able to gather over 70 wonderful auction items. From a local restaurant gift card package to Toronto Blue Jays merchandise, guests had an array of items to bid on.

We also hosted another live auction event on Friday, October 15. Guests joined via Zoom or Facebook live to celebrate the auction, learn more about what HOME has been up to in 2021, and get a closer look at some hot-ticket auction items. We also raffled off 13 gift cards to auction participants and premiered our informational video!

In total, this year’s Give Me Shelter raised \$7,215. This money will allow HOME to continue to support families in need of housing in the Western New York area. We would like to extend our thanks to

those who participated in the auction, donated items, and volunteered their time to help us run Give Me Shelter once more. Because of you, we were able to raise funds that will help us to better our community.

Stay tuned, as 2022 will bring new events and opportunities to come together as a community. We are greatly looking forward to supporting fair housing together.



Mark Evans with longtime friend Scott Gehl



and internationally. Although he was quite a joker who possessed a special sense of humor, Mark took fair housing very seriously, and would donate wonderful themed political displays to HOME’s dinners for fundraising. These buttons and autographed books would never fail to lead to a bidding war during the live auction portion of our events. He also volunteered his time to serve as auctioneer for our Fund-A-Family fundraising, and was always willing to share ideas he thought would help us raise the most money for families in need of safe, decent, affordable housing. As a long-term member of the American Political Items Collectors, Mark served in various capacities include board director, advertising manager, and member services director.

From one MDE to another, you will be truly missed.

M. DeAnna Eason, Executive Director



MARK D. EVANS

On October 21st of this year, HOME lost a very dear friend, Mark D. Evans, founding trustee of the Association for a Buffalo Presidential Center. As preparations are currently underway for our 59th Annual Dinner Celebration, I can’t help but think of Mark and his contributions to HOME, and the last several dinners. A collector at heart, Mark loved political paraphernalia including buttons, posters, and signed autobiographies. He was a major dealer of political items and ran a successful business serving collectors nationally



Gasport project: before

Gasport project: after

(continued from page 1)

We did this through a multipronged strategy using traditional outreach, such as educational brochures and billboards, and with digital media to reach our targeted audience. So far, our digital outreach content has been viewed over 54,000 times on social media and our billboards have been placed in main arteries in the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, smaller cities like Batavia, and strategically throughout the rural areas of Erie, Niagara, Chautauqua, and Genesee counties.

Ms. Blake’s modification is one of five exterior accessibility projects that we have undertaken to help individuals and families with mobility disabilities gain access to their homes. For this project, HOME developed partnerships with Western New York Independent

Living (WNYIL), to identify clients in need who are unserved by other modification programs, and University at Buffalo’s Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (IDEA Center), to conduct site assessments and develop architectural drawing for each of these projects. After consulting with the IDEA Center and WNYIL, HOME decided that modifications that allowed individuals access their homes, such as the construction of an exterior ramp or lift, would have the greatest impact on our clients. Currently, we have completed construction on three projects in Gasport, Batavia, and the City of Buffalo and have broken ground on two additional projects in Amherst and the City of Buffalo. In each case, the clients who are served by this project would have been unable

to stay in their residences without these modifications. For Ms. Blake, the lift that was completed over the summer changed her circumstances from “getting depressed without being able to leave the house” and finding it “impossible to leave” her home, to having her freedom of movement and independence back. We have heard similar stories from the other clients that this program has touched, particularly about the life changing effect of their accessibility modification. The success of the EBHNY program demonstrates an effective model for eliminating barriers to housing on the individual level, through accessibility modification and case management, while addressing larger systemic issues such as housing discrimination in our region. ▲▲▲▲

MEET HOME’S NEW COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SPECIALIST, MINNIE KIM

HOME welcomed our new Community Engagement Specialist, Jungmin “Minnie” Kim, in December. Minnie is from Buffalo and studied English at the University at Buffalo and at Cornell University.

What interested you in HOME and the role of Community Engagement Specialist?

As a Buffalonian who was nurtured by the public schools and public libraries of Erie County, I’m emotionally invested in contributing to Western New York and in seeing Buffalo become a beacon of inclusive and equitable community: a place where, regardless of our family’s income and education levels, of where our ancestors are from, of what gender identity or sexual orientation we have, or of what our disability status is, we all receive a fair chance not just to survive but to thrive and to share our talents with the world. It’s important to me that I be part of a professional team which shares my vision of inclusive and equitable community and my commitment to helping create that community through concrete actions and self-reflection; HOME struck me as such a team. The Community Engagement Specialist role matches well with my strong writing skills, my experience as a community educator and event planner, and my passion for raising public awareness regarding issues of community wellbeing.

From your perspective, what are the most critical issues facing Western New York?

Western New York’s critical issues include the following, often interconnected problems:

- If the issue of back rent isn’t resolved in a way that prioritizes the public good, there will be a deluge of evictions once the eviction moratorium expires. Homelessness is a public health problem, and especially so during a pandemic; maintaining hygiene and social distancing are difficult without a stable home.
- We need to invest more in public infrastructure, including our water systems and our public transportation systems. Erie County has several zip codes where children face a high risk of lead poisoning, which is known to cause learning disabilities as well as physical health problems. We also have zip codes where residents face high risk of developing asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease due to nearby air pollution. Better public transportation would enable jobseekers to reach more workplaces and would reduce the number of private cars, which would result in reduced fossil fuel consumption and cleaner air.
- We need economic revitalization which is aimed at helping everyday people. Many small business owners are struggling

due to the pandemic. And while multiple local employers are looking to hire workers, we have a regional shortage of well-paying jobs with robust workers’ rights, but instead of listening to expressed concerns and creating genuinely good workplaces, quite a few employers are disrespecting concerned workers and jobseekers (see, for example, how Starbucks corporate staff have responded to local unionization efforts).

- We need to invest more in our public schools, which are understaffed. We should support teachers by hiring more teachers, hiring more teacher aides, and reducing class sizes.
- Due to how systemic racism and colonization interconnect with systemic poverty, WNY’s Black, Indigenous, and Latine/Latinx residents are disproportionately likely to experience problems such as housing insecurity, food insecurity, exposure to environmental toxins, and unfairness from the criminal justice system.
- Our region’s farmers are experiencing a mental health crisis and suicide crisis due to an economic system which puts them under enormous pressure of debt rather than supporting them.

How did studying literature at UB and Cornell make you interested in working on social justice issues?

Whether novels, short stories, memoirs, plays, folktales, fairy tales, or ancient epics, the world’s greatest stories are always inherently political, are always about frictions rising from inequitable distribution of resources, rights, and/or decision-making power. Reading great literature increased my awareness of sociological patterns, such as how the fear of not being able to make rent connects practically everyone suffering due to systemic poverty. Years of analyzing stories under excellent professors’ guidance have enhanced my ability to recognize unbalanced power dynamics and to reflect on others’ and my own complicity in various systemic injustices.

What are some of your hobbies, or things you enjoy doing in your free time?

Volunteering for progressive political candidates and progressive policy advocacy organizations is my most important hobby, because lawmakers are future-makers whose decisions determine who does, and who doesn’t, get housing, healthcare, clean air, clean water, food, due process, etc. I want to see the Climate and Community Investment Act (CCIA for short) become law, as it will create 100,000+ well-paying jobs in green energy and infrastructure by putting the financial burden of climate justice where it rightfully belongs: on the corporations which have been profiting while polluting New York State’s air, water, and soil. I also enjoy reading and sewing.

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HOME RECEIVES \$350,000 TO SUPPORT LOCAL COVID-RELATED HOUSING ISSUES

By Steven Haagsma

Non-profit is among 51 organizations nationwide to receive funding.

HOME recently received a \$350,000 grant from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HOME is among 51 organizations nationwide to receive funding from HUD through the American Rescue Plan (ARP). The funding is designated to combat fair housing issues that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, targeting underserved communities who have been hit hardest by the pandemic’s health, economic, and housing consequences.

“We are grateful for HUD’s support of fair housing in WNY,” expressed HOME Executive Director, M. DeAnna Eason. “The pandemic has impacted everyone in some capacity but has disparately impacted the underserved communities of WNY.”

WITH THIS FUNDING, HOME WILL BE ABLE TO ADDRESS SAID DISPARITIES BY:

- investigating allegations of housing discrimination;
- providing housing search assistance to low-income families;
- educating municipalities on federal, state and local fair housing laws;
- addressing the housing needs of underserved populations (e.g. seniors, disabled persons and new Americans);
- mediating landlord/tenant matters; and
- conducting several other fair-housing enforcement activities.

Congressman Brian Higgins added, “This grant invests in the well-being of the Western New York community and allows HOME to extend their essential and inclusive services to a greater number of low-income families in need.”

Erie County Legislature Chair April Baskin added, “COVID-19 shined a light on the deep, complex issues in our society and inadequate housing is at the top of that list. In a place like Buffalo with very old houses and a long history of segregation, we need every resource available to ensure our most vulnerable residents have access to safe, quality housing. I commend our Congressman Brian Higgins for always fighting to make sure Buffalo’s frontline communities get their fair share of federal resources. And I thank DeAnna Eason and the entire team at HOME for pushing Buffalo further as we strive to be a place that is safe and healthy for all.”

In addition to HOME’s grant, the City of Buffalo also received ARP funds with a total of \$331 million spread across many programs. Among the programs the City has planned are funding for affordable housing and assistance for low-income renters affected by the pandemic and an enhanced inspection targeting lead contamination and other environmental health factors. ▲▲▲▲

