

May 19, 2022

Dear Councilpersons Deborah Gross and Therese Kail-Smith,

We are writing to thank and commend you for your leadership in putting forward legislation to expand Pittsburgh's affordable housing through the development of housing co-operatives. As long-time housing and racial justice advocates and researchers, we have been working with other community groups to bring affordable housing to public and policymakers' attention as private developers and increasingly remote investment firms crowd out resident perspectives and interests.

We will be working with community partners to support the legislation you put forward and to help raise public awareness about housing cooperatives and other non-market solutions to the increasingly global, and racialized, housing crisis we face. We are also working to support and expand inclusionary zoning initiatives. As we argued in a recent white paper we published through Pitt's University Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR), [Pittsburgh's Affordable Housing Crisis: Is Privatization the Solution?](#), Pittsburgh and most other cities' leaders have continued to rely on market-driven policies to address housing challenges, despite their unambiguously dismal record. Your work to introduce this legislation is both essential and especially welcome.

In collaboration with other Pittsburgh housing advocates, we have been working with leaders in other cities through [The Shift](#), a global network led by global housing expert, former [UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing](#), Leilani Farha, who visited Pittsburgh recently and joined Councilperson Gross in a press conference recognizing Fair Housing Month. Farha spent a week in early April meeting with advocates, public officials, and other community members, and we've [summarized her key recommendations for Pittsburgh in this document](#). In short, Ms. Farha reminded our public officials that they are all *duty bearers under international law, responsible for implementing U.S. international human rights obligations, which include the protection of housing as a human right*. She stressed that our city is at a critical juncture amid intensified financialization pressures, and we need to act quickly and concertedly to preserve and protect existing affordable housing while better regulating the role of private investors—particularly private equity firms and their subsidiaries— in residential housing.

Below we share a few of the resources regarding the financialization of housing and the legal obligations of local public officials in regard to residents' right to adequate, safe, affordable housing with security of tenure. In early June, Ms. Farha will be releasing a set of human rights directives regarding the financialization of housing aimed at helping inform local officials of the applications of the law in this changing and complex global economic context. We will be helping promote these directives and encourage you and your staff to join the formal launch event being held in the European Parliament building ([Link for web-streamed launch from the European Parliament, Thursday June 2 at 11:00AM EDT -preceding the launch there's a 9:30AM screening of documentary on financialization, Push](#))

As we all know, our city is more than its buildings and streetscapes. Its people and the culture they co-create is what makes us Pittsburgh. Affordable housing and stable communities are essential elements of any city. This is what makes housing a *social good* that differs from other market commodities. The only way to address the growing inequities and the ongoing displacement of African American and other low-income and young renters from our city is to develop the kind alternatives to market-driven housing that your legislation promotes. We look forward to working with you to support this and other efforts to further expand and protect affordable housing and defend Pittsburgh residents' human right to housing

in every way possible. Please reach out if we can help you and your staff as you carry out this important work.

Sincerely,

Jackie Smith, PhD, Professor of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh & Co-coordinator, Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance

Daniel McClymonds, Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh

Connor Chapman, Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh

Cc: Pittsburgh City Council members; Mayor Gainey; Gainey Transition Committee on Equitable Development

Supplemental resources

- [Pittsburgh's Affordable Housing Crisis: Is Privatization the Solution?](#) By Daniel McClymonds, Jackie Smith, PhD, & Connor Chapman (University of Pittsburgh Department of Sociology) with Randall Taylor (Penn Plaza Support & Action Network), [University Center for Social and Urban Research, University of Pittsburgh, February 2022](#).
- [Rights Based Housing Strategies](#)- Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing, Feb-March 2018-Demonstrates the case for a rights-based housing strategy, identifies 10 principles to guide such a strategy and recommendations for governments.
- [Guidelines for the implementation of the right to adequate housing](#) (UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, 2019 [[A/HRC/43/43](#)])
- [Shift Cities](#): Since its launch in 2020, The Shift has been working with Canadian municipal leaders to translate the National Housing Strategy into local policies. Pittsburgh advocates are working with other leaders around the United States to build a network of U.S. municipal authorities willing to take a similar step to join The Shift's work to promote and protect housing rights in the United States.
- [Cities for Rent: Investigating Corporate Landlords Across Europe](#) This project by Arena for Journalism in Europe brings together over 25 investigative and data journalists and visualisations experts from 16 European countries to explore what's driving financialization and how it impacts European cities.
- [Who \(really\) owns your city? How corporate landlords are using homes to make money](#)