

Global Housing Expert, UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing Visit to Pittsburgh, Fair Housing Month (April 2022)

Summary Report and Recommendations

In April 2022, Pittsburgh welcomed global housing expert, former [UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing](#), Leilani Farha to meet with city officials, housing advocates, students and other residents. The following report was compiled by the team helping organize the visit,* and it highlights key lessons, and recommendations from our discussions. It also includes links to a wealth of resources and policy tools our esteemed guest provided throughout the course of our week together.

Farha's work in the United Nations focused on identifying drivers of what is a growing, *global* problem of homelessness and housing insecurity. It is important to understand our housing challenges in this global context. We cannot address it without that global lens, and Farha points to the *crucial role being played by finance capital*. Cities are in a dangerously lopsided position relative to globally organized residential real estate developers, who represent one of the biggest industries in the world. For these powerful groups, housing is a source of profits, and the well-being of the people impacted is of no concern. The deepening world housing crisis is a direct result of finance's ability to take advantage of moments of crisis—such as the 2008 mortgage crisis and the Coronavirus pandemic. We need to be smarter and more strategic in our choices of policy tools if we are to get a handle on this problem—which is a life-and-death issue for growing numbers of people.

Another reminder Farha brought is that **“anyone exercising government authority is responsible to international human rights obligations.”** And although the United States is far from a model in adopting international human rights treaties, a substantial body of treaty and customary law still applies in this country. Farha provides resources for policymakers and citizens so that we can improve local compliance with global human rights expectations, which include the right to adequate housing.

At our opening press conference marking Fair Housing Month, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha warned:

“I'm really fearful that Pittsburgh will not look like the city you once knew. That's already happening with the displacement of African Americans. So I think **now** you have a window of opportunity. I think things aren't great here, but they could be a whole lot worse. I think there's a window of opportunity, but **the action has to be concerted and swift.**”

In particular, she pointed out that Pittsburgh policy makers must work quickly to:

- **Preserve and protect existing affordable housing**, and
- **Significantly strengthen regulations on private investors in residential housing development**—particularly private equity firms and their subsidiaries.

*Farha visited the University of Pittsburgh as a H.J. Heinz Foundation Visiting Fellow in the [Global Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh](#). Co-sponsors of this visit and related events include the City of Pittsburgh Commission on Human Relations, Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance, Pitt Law Center for Civil Rights and Racial Justice, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs: and Urban Studies, Pitt Law Center for International Legal Education, Sociology Department, and the Office of Health Sciences Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University of Pittsburgh.

- It is also important to stress that **governments have a legal responsibility to regulate private actors** in defense of community interests including secure and safe housing for residents. (See below)
- The top recommendation Farha made to us is that **Pittsburgh needs a housing strategy**, and specifically one that places the human right to housing at its center. Currently, the city's development is being driven by real estate investors and developers, whose interests are in generating profits. To address our housing crisis, we need leadership by and on behalf of residents and the city of Pittsburgh that syncs housing supply with residents' needs and incomes. Whoever leads these decisions determines who can live and thrive here. (See resources below)
 - The housing strategy should include a comprehensive [fair housing audit](#) of housing needs, existing infrastructure, and property ownership.
 - Farha pointed out that some cities plan their housing development to align with residents' incomes and particular needs (i.e., families, students, etc.). Locations and rents of planned developments should be *geared to the incomes of existing residents*.
- Farha also registered alarm at the scale of **displacement of the city's African American population**. She urged us to make it an **urgent priority** to stem further displacement and allow those who've been displaced the ability to return to the city they've called home.
 - Given the long-term trend of what public health researcher Mindy Fullilove calls "serial forced displacement" of Pittsburgh's Black residents, Farha urged housing advocates to consider creative uses of the law to address structural discrimination. This will require careful legal and political analysis, but there may be some resources in international (and national) laws that we have yet to tap.
 - Particularly alarming to Farha was the county **eviction filing rates**, which are well above the norms elsewhere. For instance, Toronto saw 20,500 evictions in 2018 with a municipal population of 2.7 million, while Allegheny's evictions number between 13,000 and 14,000 for a *county* population of 1.2 million.
 - Eviction filing processes are disproportionately impacting African American residents and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, the filing and recording practices here disproportionately serve landlords' interests while exacerbating renters' housing precarity over the long-term.
- Pittsburgh has few protections in place for renters, denying them their legal due process and leaving them vulnerable to eviction, unsafe living conditions, and abuse. **Weak tenant protections also invite financial predation**. One step we can take to protect our city from unscrupulous speculation is to do more (and quickly) to protect renters. In particular, we should take steps to stop people from being evicted into homelessness. (See UN report: [Access to justice for the right to housing \(A/HRC/40/61\)](#))
- In her work with national and local governments, Farha has seen the importance of having effective feedback loops between residents and governments for supporting good housing strategies. In other words, responsive democratic institutions that support public participation and engagement in local government must be part of our housing strategy.

What is often missing in public policy conversations around housing is that **the city has obligations under international law to protect residents' right to have access to safe, affordable housing with security of tenure**. The UN Sustainable Goals (SDGs) also require action to protect the right to housing (SDG 11). Pittsburgh and other cities have failed dramatically here, and much more needs to be done to ensure that our city is a place where all residents can live, thrive, and if they so choose, remain.

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. Yet national and local policies have turned housing into a source of private wealth accumulation that benefits a fortunate few. Real estate and financial entities have been empowered to propel policies fueling rapid exchanges of commodified properties (i.e., homes and land), fueling rising housing costs while undermining community stability and uprooting people's lives. Consequently, the housing sector is the leading driver of corporate wealth and growing inequality in our globalized economy.

Farha's work at the United Nations and with national and local governments and advocacy movements has helped generate some lessons and strategies that are being used in places around the world to better protect and defend housing as a human right and ensure that our cities remain places where people live and thrive. We include a list of some of these below.

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Resources for Housing Practitioners and Advocates

- **[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.
- **[The Shift Directives on Financialization and Human Rights \(June 2022\)](#)** *The Shift Directives are the first-ever comprehensive framework providing governments and investors with guidance to effectively address the financialization of housing in accordance with human rights law.*
- **[Guidelines for the implementation of the right to adequate housing](#)** (UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, 2019 [[A/HRC/43/43](#)]) [The full text of the guidelines is available in all six UN languages [here](#).]
 - **Model:** [Human-Rights Based Housing Strategy](#) -Kitchener, ON
 - **Model:** [Toronto Rights-Based Housing Strategy](#)
 - **Model:** [Boston's Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Tools & Assessment form for developers](#)
 - ***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. They identify seven key priorities for municipalities as:
 1. Develop/strengthen human rights infrastructure
 2. Advance progressive realization of the human right to adequate housing
 3. Ensure meaningful community participation in planning and development
 4. End homelessness and the criminalization of homelessness
 5. Advance substantive equality for marginalized groups and prioritize those most in need
 6. Regulate the private sector and address the financialization of housing
 7. Prevent evictions and prohibit forced evictions

- **#Pushback Talks Podcast:** [#PUSHBACK Talks](#) delves deeper into the topic of financialization around the globe. Accompanied each week by expert guests, hosts Leilani Farha and Fredrik Gertten discuss current events and international and regional trends as they relate to housing.
 - **Selected episodes:** [April 20, 2022 *Palestine and the Heartache of an Advocate*](#): In her regular podcast, Leilani Farha reflects on her recent travel that took her *from Palestine to Pittsburgh*, considering lessons about people and our connections to the land. [“My Home is an Asset Class: Interview with member of European Parliament”](#) April 6 2022; [‘Davos Man’ - The Billionaires Who Own the World](#) - with NYT correspondent Peter S. Goodman (Feb. 9, 2022); [Davos Man Part 2: The Pandemic Cash Cow](#) (Feb. 16, 2022)
- The documentary film, “Push” uncovers the problem of housing financialization and its impacts around the world. [Online streaming of the documentary can be purchased at this link.](#)
- [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.
- **Coming soon (late May 2022) Human Rights Directives on Financialization and Housing** (<https://make-the-shift.org/>)
- **Housing-Relevant UN Reports on Human Rights in the United States**
 - [Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on his mission to the United States of America](#), Philip Alston (2018)
 - [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing on her mission to the United States of America](#), Raquel Rolnik (2010).
 - [Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism on his mission to the United States of America](#), Doudou Diène (2008)

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Leilani Farha’s visit to Pittsburgh, April 2022-Recordings & Links

During the week of **April 4-7, 2022**, the former [UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing](#), Leilani Farha visited Pittsburgh as a H.J. Heinz Foundation Visiting Fellow in the University of Pittsburgh [Global Studies Center](#). Below you’ll find links to recordings of public events during this visit, along with other related resources and links. These links are also available on the University of Pittsburgh’s [Global Studies Center webpage](#) and the GSC [YouTube channel](#).

- [PUSH](#) is an award-winning documentary film examining one of the most dangerous trends in cities: the financialization of housing. When housing is turned into real estate to be traded in global markets, what happens to the people who need homes to build lives and communities? How can we make better use of international law to protect the human right to housing?
 - Purchase [online streaming of the documentary, “Push” for \\$12 at this link](#). To purchase or arrange a community screening visit: <https://gooddocs.net>
 - [PUSHBACK Talks Podcast](#). Leilani Farha joins Push director Fredrik Gertten and guests on this regular podcast aimed at deepening understandings of housing

financialization, the global forces driving it, and how communities can respond to protect housing rights.

- [Panel Discussion of Push with Leilani Farha](#)- View recording of the discussion [here](#).
- *[Housing and the Right to the City LINK TBD]* Panel dialogue, hosted at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law/Center for Human Rights and Racial Justice, April 1, 2022
- **Public Lecture:** [Global & Local Strategies for Advancing Housing as a Human Right](#) *As UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing, Ms. Farha worked to push governments to do more to protect residents' access to safe and affordable housing. She shares lessons about her work with governments at local, national and global levels and efforts to help housing justice advocates make better use of international tools to defend and advance the right to housing. (University of Pittsburgh, April 4, 2022)*
- **Public Lecture:** **Using International Law and Institutions to Support Housing as a Human Right.** *Many local policy makers and legal practitioners remain unaware of the extensive body of international law and precedent upholding the internationally recognized human right to adequate housing. Farha will discuss this legal context and how the United Nations is working to support governments to do better and more to realize this most basic right for all residents. (University of Pittsburgh, April 6, 2022)*
- **American Apartheid Cities: Human Rights Strategies for Advancing Racial and Housing Justice, A Community Action Dialogue,** *Leilani Farha joins a panel of Pittsburgh housing advocates to consider strategies for building a local and trans-local movement for the right to housing. (University of Pittsburgh, April 7, 2022). Panelists include: Randall Taylor-Penn Plaza Support and Action Coalition, Tyrek Williams, CREATElab, Jason Beery, Urbankind Institute; Ed Nusser, City of Bridges. Moderator: Executive Director of Pittsburgh's Commission on Human Relations, Jam Hammond. Hill District Community Engagement Center. Watch a recording of the Community Action Dialogue [here](#).*

Media Coverage of Leilani Farha's visit to Pittsburgh, April 2022

- **#Pushbacktalks Podcasts:** [April 20, 2022 Palestine and the Heartache of an Advocate](#): In her regular podcast, Leilani Farha reflects on her recent travel that took her **from Palestine to Pittsburgh**, considering lessons about people and our connections to the land.
- ["Canadian Lawyer Leilani Farha Joins Chris Moore"](#) Chris Moore, KDKA News Radio Sunday, April 3, 2022. *An estimated 1.8 billion people worldwide are unhoused or face extreme housing insecurity. Farha and her organization, The Shift, are working to address the global housing crisis by advancing local and global policies that treat housing as a human right rather than a market commodity.*
- ['Housing is a human right': Lecture highlights global housing issues, displacement](#) *Pitt News* April 7, 2022
- [Fair Housing Month Press conference](#)- featuring Leilani Farha (recording, April 4, 2022)
 - [KDKA TV News : Elected officials and advocates discuss furthering fair housing initiatives](#)
 - CBS Pittsburgh: [Elected officials and advocates discuss promoting fair housing initiatives](#)