

Preface

By Congressman Barney Frank (D-MA)

For some time now the excellent report done by the National Low Income Housing Coalition documenting the serious housing crisis that confronts so many low income Americans has been called “Out of Reach.” Unfortunately, for the past few years, affordable housing for low income people has not only been “out of reach,” it has been “out of sight.” That is, it has been off the national agenda because the people in control of the Congress have blocked any efforts to revive federal programs for the construction of affordable housing. The voucher program does add some equity to our housing policies, and I have resisted efforts to diminish its ability to help low income people. But a housing policy which consists almost entirely of annual vouchers adds to the demand for housing in ways that do not help increase the supply, and a sensible housing policy must do both.

Increasingly, students of the American economy now understand that the housing crisis that affects so many moderate and low income people is not simply a social problem – although that by itself should be enough to lead us to act. It’s also an economic problem in both the macro and micro aspects. Nationally, we now understand how important the housing sector is to a prosperous national economy. While private construction will continue to bear the brunt of meeting housing needs, a contribution from the public sector is also important if we are to maintain housing’s supportive economic role. Additionally, in many regions of the country, the high cost of housing is a barrier to economic development. In my home state of Massachusetts, leading business people have pointed to the high cost of housing in Massachusetts across the

board as an obstacle to their ability to increase employment in our state. In the gulf area devastated by Hurricane Katrina, the failure of the federal government to take a vigorous role in helping replace the large number of affordable housing units that were destroyed has become an economic problem, as employers in the service industry find themselves short of workers because those workers would have no place to live.

In addition to recognizing the economic importance of housing, we have discredited the myth that government-aided housing must somehow lead to the construction of stark, socially destructive ghettos for the poor. It is true that we did build housing like this after World War II. But it is also true that that was the result of a series of blatant mistakes, and was in no way inherent in having the federal government support housing. A full range of housing programs, including various direct construction programs and public/private cooperation, can lead to a significant increase in badly needed affordable housing with none of the negative consequences of before.

I have enjoyed working with the National Low Income Housing Coalition during my years in the Congress because of the passion and accuracy of its advocacy. As Chair of the Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives with jurisdiction over housing programs in the 110th Congress, I look forward to continuing that collaboration with the National Low Income Housing Coalition and other groups so that we can begin to put in place the public policies that are called for by the statistics set forth here.