

What is the 21st Century Challenge?

“We have the know-how in the world to house everyone. We have the resources in the world to house everyone. All that’s missing is the WILL to do it.” Millard Fuller

With the 21st Century Challenge, Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI) challenges Communities to eliminate substandard housing in their area, and to set a date to meet the Challenge that is no more than 20 years away. This is a bold vision for Habitat affiliates and for their communities.

Can Habitat for Humanity eliminate substandard housing alone? No!

A successful effort must be one that involves the whole community in partnership. Habitat affiliates and other housing providers and interest groups such as churches, civic groups, neighborhoods, businesses and other non-profit organizations join together into a locally driven initiative.

In order to be certified as a 21st Century Challenge community by Habitat for Humanity International, local initiatives must complete a 21st Century Challenge Certification Application. The six steps of certification, some of which may occur concurrently, are:

1. Organize a properly constituted local initiative.
2. Define the local housing problem (determine the amount of substandard housing).
3. Set a realistic goal and date for solving the problem.
4. Involve the community in the effort.
5. Develop a work plan and budget that includes an outline of the available resources; ie money, people, goods and services – and a development plan to access those resources.
6. Sign the commitment form at the end of the certification application committing the members of the collaborative to the plan that the application details.

An introductory manual entitled “First Steps to the 21st Century Challenge” outlines the importance of preparation by the local Habitat affiliate. As part of the preparation, the local affiliate has contacted HFHI Regional Support Center, examined their Triennial Review, completed a plan for growth, and most importantly, confirmed their relationships with neighborhoods where house-building might occur. “First Steps to the 21st Century Challenge” is available by calling the HFHI Affiliate Support Manager for your area or by doing a search on PartnerNet (HFHI’s website for affiliates).

Why Should Your Community Seek to Eliminate Substandard Housing Through a Local Collaborative Effort?

Decent Housing Should Not Be a Lottery

“The vision is not to build for a few lucky families. We are not ‘Lottery for Habitat.’ We are building for everyone,” said Millard Fuller, the Founder and President of Habitat for Humanity International. “The goal of

Habitat for Humanity is that everyone should have at least a simple, decent place to live. We need to develop these initiative partnerships to address the whole problem so that we do not become a lottery.” Every family in your community should be a “lucky” family when it comes to housing. With a vision of eliminating substandard housing from your community, it will take more than the Habitat affiliate can provide. It will take more resources, more volunteers, more money and more effort. Only through a broad-based community initiative will a significant impact be made.

Collaboration Generates Success

As a member of your community and as an activist in housing issues, you realize that there are others who are alarmed about the state of substandard housing. Volunteers work together each day, building for Habitat. Working with partner families, Habitat affiliates have made substantial contributions to families and to communities. However, the need for affordable housing increases as quickly as a home is built. In order to make a long-term impact, the key stakeholders who are committed to eliminating substandard housing must gather together and harness their creativity and energy. Moving forward as a collaborative coalition, a difference will be made.

As noted anthropologist Margaret Mead stated, “I never doubted that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” An initiative partnership in your community galvanizes support. It is attractive to funding organizations and state and national housing providers because it addresses problems in a comprehensive rather than in a narrow way. Because this is a collaborative approach, access to more resources – money, materials and people – is broadened. Excitement and public support will be generated within the community as they hear, read and see community members working together for the betterment of the whole community. The 21st Century Challenge is a vehicle to gather that group of committed citizens together toward the achievement of a tangible goal.

Long Term Advantages

Consider the example of Americus, GA where Habitat for Humanity International is headquartered. The 700 houses built and rehabilitated represent an investment of \$12 million, which generated an economic boost to the community of \$84 million, or seven times the initial investment, according to economic development standards. Homeowners are paying property tax for the first time or paying more than before, adding \$100,000 per annum to the local tax base. Other long-term benefits may also include more jobs, stronger educational performance from children, better school/work attendance, improved health and less crime. In an effort to eliminate substandard housing, a new way of thinking--a new paradigm--is taking shape. The new paradigm is one in which responsibility for eliminating substandard housing lies within the community itself, more specifically within the neighborhoods. Under this new way of thinking, the Habitat affiliate will become the facilitator of a whole coalition that is comprised of other housing agencies, neighborhoods, churches, governmental entities, social service agencies, and civic groups, to name a few. What will emerge is a collaborative movement that will come up with creative solutions, resources, commitment and energy. By working together, more people will be reached, limited resources will be more effectively used, duplication of effort will be reduced, and positive solutions will be implemented to address very complex issues.