

A City in Need of Shelter

by Richard Freeman

In Philadelphia, one-sixth of all households pay 50% or more of their income for housing. The number of vacant apartments in the city has doubled over the past three decades; the rate of evictions from homes is running at 600-1,000 per month; and, at least 33,000 affordable housing units need to be built for the poor. Philadelphia echoes the nation's economic crisis: Its loss of 230,000 decent-paying manufacturing jobs over the past 35 years has created a large number of poor, who cannot afford housing.

The 2000 Decennial Census reported that Philadelphia has 589,280 households. Some 261,251 of them, 35%, earned annual incomes of less than \$20,000, which should classify all of them as poor. And even above that level, another 129,109 Philadelphia households pay 30% or more of their income on housing. Moreover, 90,376 households (earning \$20,000 or less) pay a staggering 50% or of their income for shelter.

More than half of all the housing units in Philadelphia were built before 1934. It has 70,009 units that are vacant, double the level of 1975. Philadelphia needs massive housing construction. In a March, 2003 study, entitled, *Closing the Gap: Housing (un)Affordability in Philadelphia*, authors Amy Hiller and Dennis Culhane reported, "There are at least 30,000 fewer affordable housing units in Philadelphia than needed for rental households with incomes below \$20,000." The authors conclude that the City of Philadelphia needs to build 33,000 more units just for the poorest of the poor. But the great age of the city's housing stock defines a building project of perhaps 50,000-100,000 units.

In the U.S., an estimated 6 million households live on the edge of homelessness, because of the unaffordability of housing. Many poor families can afford to pay for housing only because of the assistance of Section 8 vouchers provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which pays for a portion of these families housing cost. However, the Bush-Cheney White House proposes new rules to cut \$1.6 billion from the Section 8 program in the Fiscal Year 2004-05 budget, which means that 250,000 households nationwide are threatened with being thrown into homelessness after Oct. 1, of which several thousand are in Philadelphia. Federal funding to Philadelphia has already been slashed by 8%.

High-priced, high-rise apartments may be built at the site of the dismantled Philadelphia Navy Yard. But at the Richard Allen Homes in North Philadelphia, 1,324 units for the poor, were torn down, and 408 duplex homes were built in their place. Of the new duplex units, 178 have been set aside for the poor. Where are the rest of the former residents to live?