

One Family One Community is an organization that works to reduce chronic homelessness and remedy the root causes of housing instability. It is a true grassroots organization, working to advance a dual mission of housing access and civic engagement while teaching self-reliance and political self-determination.

We improve housing access by acquiring and rehabilitating of bank-owned foreclosed properties, which are then made available for homeless families to rent or purchase. This approach seeks to address an overwhelming need with an underutilized and underappreciated resource. Currently, there are over eleven thousand vacant, foreclosed, and boarded multi-unit and single-unit homes throughout the Twin Cities region – nearly five for every homeless family. In order to transform these properties into housing, One Family One Community is pioneering an approach modeled off the Massachusetts abandoned housing receivership initiative, using the Hennepin County quiet title application to resolve legal and financial problems obstructing the sale or reuse of vacant buildings. Many abandoned units also are currently in need of repairs. We help perform needed renovation on these units, and in the process, provide practical vocational training to members. This process also helps revitalize the surrounding area by alleviating the pressure that idle and vacant dwellings place on property values – a positive externality that benefits the entire community.

The second prong of our organization’s mission is civic engagement, which encompasses leadership development, issue advocacy, political and community participation, and neighborhood activism. We believe that disadvantaged populations like the homeless often lack a political voice or appropriate advocates, and are rarely part of decisions that affect them. In order to correct this problem, we train members in political participation, particularly in bodies that work on issues of homelessness and housing instability. Our organization teaches political self-reliance, and expects its members to serve as passionate, well-informed advocates for their own interests. In order to facilitate this goal, we hold weekly training sessions and provide support for members as they take up roles in neighborhood governance. We also seek to participate in policymaking by providing information about, and transportation to and from, government hearings and meetings throughout the region.

One Family One Community believes that its housing access program and advocacy program are mutually reinforcing. Unstable living arrangements can badly undermine an individual's ability to participate in community politics, and can limit access even to fundamental political rights such as voting. For instance, individuals living in shelters sometimes struggle to register to vote, since doing so often requires them to convince shelter staff to confirm their address with the registrars. In similar fashion, effective advocacy can improve housing outcomes, by allowing homeless individuals to themselves identify the most salient obstacles to housing stability, and to work directly with policymakers to address those issues.

How does the organizational leadership, both paid and volunteer, represent the communities it works with?

One Family One Community is a true grassroots organization. Its leadership is drawn directly from its membership, and made up of program participants who have demonstrated their passion for the organization’s mission and a willingness to work hard to benefit the community. Many of its leaders have previously faced, and overcome, the same challenges that its members currently face, such as extreme poverty or the stigma of involvement in the criminal justice system.

How is the organization connected to the communities it serves?

In keeping with One Family One Community’s ideals of self-sufficiency and self-determination, our project proposal was developed in consultation with our membership. Our leadership sought

significant input from members about which sort of investments could best support the organization's advocacy program.

These members are drawn from a population that more traditional organizations often have trouble reaching, such as low-income African-Americans, individuals living in shelters, individuals with criminal records, or young families living in extreme poverty.

What previous experiences does the organization have with community engagement and leadership development work?

Although One Family One Community is a young organization, it has accomplished much already. We have rehabilitated one house by relying upon efforts of our members and volunteers, and demonstrated the potential of our housing program. We are currently exploring methods of responsibly scaling up the housing program in a variety of Minneapolis neighborhoods. Meanwhile, weekly training and organizing sessions regularly attract over three dozen participants. A number of experts and prominent community members have spoken at these meetings, such as Myron Orfield, [OTHERS]

Our organization's leadership development and civic engagement work has already transformed the lives of many individuals. A number of members have become active members of their community. One member now sits on the board of the Central Area Neighborhood Development Organization, and on that body's Housing Task Force. Two other members have joined the Northside Residents Redevelopment Council, where they are currently developing a housing committee. Another has joined the Hawthorne Neighborhood Council. It is also worth noting that the leadership development program has led to beneficial outcomes in other areas as well, helping several members have transition from homelessness to permanent, stable housing, and helping them obtain employment.

Does the organization have the capacity to manage this project?

Previous experience has demonstrated the viability of One Family One Community's civic engagement and leadership development efforts, even shortly after the organization's founding, when, because of its grassroots nature, meetings venues were difficult to obtain and most activities were conducted on a volunteer basis by members. We are confident in our ability to soundly manage our proposal, particularly with a stable stream of resources.

How is the organization actively working to build an inclusive Minneapolis?

Collectively, our membership has traveled to and participated in public hearings at the Met Council, and in a number of regional city and county governments. Notably, we have testified in favor of affordable housing in the city of Carver, providing support for its city council, which, as has been widely reported, is facing considerable pushback from residents for its efforts to expand housing opportunity. We have also traveled to the State Capitol to demonstrate our support for SF 282, which appropriates money for a housing pilot project, and met with Representative Ray Dehn to discuss a number of topics. Our efforts have been well-received and raised the profile of housing opportunity issues across the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

Our organization has also found it useful to form productive partnerships with a variety of other community groups and nonprofits that work in related fields. We have worked with a diverse range of organizations, including MICAH, Urban League, STEP, and the Coalition to End Homelessness.