The Washington Low Income Housing Alliance:
How a handful of organizations and individuals grew into a powerful movement for affordable housing in our state

This issue tells the story of the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (the Alliance), Washington State’s lead champion in advocating for affordable housing. The Alliance has a rich history reaching back more than 30 years. Its roots can be traced to the Washington Coalition for Rural Housing (WCRH), which was created in 1980 to advocate for more affordable housing in rural Washington.

Our story is filled with many twists and turns and legislative achievements; it’s a story of how a relatively small organization grew into a movement that today is getting affordable housing the public attention and recognition it so profoundly deserves. Above all, this is a story of people who recognized how much more can be achieved when we all work together and speak with a unified voice. I hope you’ll enjoy following it as much as I have enjoyed putting it together.
Advocating for Affordable Housing

In 1988, the Washington Coalition for Rural Housing (WCRH) and five other housing and community development organizations started a series of meetings to create a statewide coalition that would be the voice of affordable housing. The goal was to unite rural areas and cities, communities east and west of the Cascades, and public and private housing advocates. This statewide organization, the Washington Low Income Housing Congress (the Congress), was the forerunner to today’s Alliance.

Those of you who haven’t followed the Alliance’s progress over the years may find the chronology confusing, but this should help:

- The Congress was founded in 1988.
- The Congress launched a sister grassroots organization, the Washington Low-Income Housing Network, in 1993.
- In 2003, the Congress and the Network joined forces as the Alliance, setting the stage for the capacious tent the Alliance represents today.
- In 2011, the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless and the Alliance merged into one organization.

As with any significant movement, there are so many people who have contributed enormously to carry the cause of the Alliance forward. This newsletter encompasses the remembrances of more than a dozen people; I wish we had room to include the perspectives of dozens more. The affordable housing milestones the Alliance has accomplished in the legislature to date are the work of thousands of supporters who called and wrote and met with their legislators, who testified in Olympia, who attended meetings and organized and contributed precious time away from their families.

This is a story of an evolving organization, whose members, in past Housing Congress Chair Kathy Roseth’s words, “grew up”—who learned how to organize, to lobby effectively, to reach out to constituents, to make a difference in many people’s lives. Over the years, the Alliance has been successful in getting significant resources committed to our cause. Along the way, it has become the primary voice for affordable housing in our state.

I’ll begin this history with a brief look back at the Alliance’s predecessors, beginning with WCRH.
Breaking Ground in Affordable Housing

In 1980 WCRH was created by rural housing advocates from Yakima and Bellingham to call attention to deteriorating affordable housing opportunities in rural Washington, and to advocate for resources to address this problem. With the help of a grant from the federal Community Services Administration, WCRH published four studies on rural housing issues between 1980 and 1983.\(^1\)

In the mid-1980s, WCRH became part of a loose-knit group of organizations in the state that were seeking more resources to develop affordable housing. Coordinated legislative activities among members helped create the first funding for homeless programs in the state (1982), and create the Washington State Housing Finance Commission (1983) and the Washington State Housing Trust Fund (1986).\(^2\)

The creation of the Housing Trust Fund (HTF) was a profound catalyst for what would later become the Alliance. Sharon Lee, who is currently the executive director of the Low Income Housing Institute, was the person who truly lit fires back in 1986—in organizing people and organizations to form the HTF Coalition that saw the HTF through to its first million-dollar funding allocation in 1987. She deserves a lot of credit for recognizing that all the great energy and passion that came together to make the HTF a reality was a powerful movement that should be nurtured and sustained.

And interestingly, it was our legislative leaders, including former Governor Gary Locke, now U.S. Ambassador to China, who in the mid-1980s was Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, along with current House Speaker Frank Chopp, who gave housing advocates this powerful message: You need to get together and speak with one voice in Olympia.


With the help of a grant from the federal Community Services Administration, Washington Coalition for Rural Housing published four studies on rural housing issues between 1980 and 1983.
The Early Years

The Launch of the Congress

Carla Okigwe remembers this early period well. The first Chair of the Housing Congress, she was also Executive Director of the Housing Development Consortium (HDC) for more than 20 years before she retired in 2009. Looking back at the creation of the Commission in 1983, she recalls, “It was so difficult to establish the Commission’s base legislation, because every time someone would bring up a draft bill, there would be all these other guys out there opposing it because they wanted something slightly different. Everyone was cutting their feet off at the ankles. Finally, they all realized they were getting exhausted year after year after year, fighting against each other.”

HDC represents affordable housing developers and other professionals in King County, and Carla recalls how tough it was to represent King County interests in the state legislature in the 1980s. “At that time, King County did not have a strong record in the state legislature. Rural legislators would always outvote King County issues.” After the success of the HTF’s founding, the idea of a cohesive lobbying group to represent affordable housing interests across the entire state was on the radar of many advocates. But someone still needed to make the calls and get the ball rolling. That was Sharon Lee, remembers Carla.

In April of 1988, WCRH, the Washington Coalition for the Homeless, the Washington Association for Community Economic Development, the Fair Budget Action Committee, the Tenants’ Union, and HDC met in Yakima to begin the dialogue on creating what would become the Washington Low Income Housing Congress. We made up the Housing Congress Planning Committee, and we discussed issues such as the future organization’s focus and the criteria for membership.

I remember that first meeting in Yakima; we met in a respectable hotel whose best days are now in the past. We couldn’t afford much in terms of a conference room, so we made a deal to get that for free if several attendees booked a room. Kurt Creager, who was then President of WCRH, had about $2,500 that remained in the WCRH’s coffers from a federal grant. He committed that to be the first seed money for the Congress.

On May 3, 1988, the Planning Committee issued an invitation to approximately 34 people to attend a meeting on June 21 “to decide if a new statewide organization is needed to increase state funding and support for low-income housing.” And that’s how this whole movement got started.
We took on many topics at that first meeting, including how to legally structure the organization, along with its purpose, function, governance, funding, and staffing. We talked through a host of issues that included the legislative agenda for the next session, housing for the elderly and for farmworkers, manufactured home standards, and homelessness, to name just a few. The tenor of this meeting was characteristic of the impassioned discussions that would come to be a hallmark of the Congress and later, Alliance gatherings. We all brought our own perspectives and cherished causes to the table, but in the end, we’ve always managed to come to a consensus.

We met again at the Sunset Café in Cle Elum on September 8. I served as chair this time around. A lot of ingredients had been stirred into the pot by this point; we were ready to create the framework that would lead the organization forward. We decided to:

- Create the Congress with a Board of Directors
- Have a membership focused on public entities, community-based organizations, and organizations that serve low-income people
- Collect dues and raise funds
- Require a 2/3 vote as a quorum to determine legislative priorities
- Engage in education, lobbying, networking, producing a newsletter, organizing, and mobilizing

We all brought our own perspectives and cherished causes to the table, but in the end, we’ve always managed to come to a consensus.
Meetings in subsequent months would serve to refine our organization and its processes, but we were on our way. One interesting point is that the Congress was not legally incorporated as a 501(c)(4) until 1994! But from the very beginning, we established that seeking a permanent funding source for the HTF would be a key priority. By the time of our Board meeting on October 7th, we had created a draft legislative agenda for the 1989 session, including a goal of $50 million for the HTF.

At our membership meeting on October 25th, we set annual dues of $250/year per member organization and approved a general operating agreement, preamble, and principles. In addition to funding for the HTF, the Congress’ other 1989 legislative priorities would be securing funding for the Emergency Shelter Assistance Program (ESAP), preserving existing low-income housing, and preventing tenant dislocation.

One last key decision would prove to be a critical one for this fledgling organization. At the Congress’ meeting on November 9th, the sub-committee members who’d been charged to find the right lobbyist for the Congress announced the hiring of veteran lobbyist Michael (Mike) Ryherd. I’ve excerpted below some remarks from a letter written by Sue Taoka, who at the time was working for the City of Seattle. Sue wrote this on behalf of the Interim Steering Committee on November 16, 1988—and her words encapsulate the vision of this organization, which has been amply realized over the nearly quarter of a century since:

The hard work of this summer and fall is bearing the fruit we have all looked forward to: the formation of the Washington Low Income Housing Congress! .... Housing advocates, non-profit housing developers, public officials and concerned individuals have joined together to work for adequate, safe, affordable housing for all the people in Washington State.... [it] is the voice we have been seeking ... The Congress will speak to the state’s public policy makers in Olympia in a voice which, with its statewide and community-based membership, cannot be ignored.

**Early Leadership**

Carla says that the role of the first Chair of the Congress fell to her, “Because I was perceived as a more neutral person among all the groups, and because I just knew a lot of people.” In addition to her then-role with HDC, she’d done contract work for the Commission and the state, and had worked in key housing roles for both King County and the City of Seattle. I know there was also another formidable reason for Carla’s being named Chair: In whatever roles she’s held, she’s always brought her quick intelligence, strong leadership, and laser focus on how to be more effective: “By building up lots of experience, lots of trust, everyone knowing what everyone else was going to do, keeping...

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—CARLA OKIGWE

**Mike Ryherd** was the Congress’ lobbyist from its founding until 1993.
it all out in the open. We just kept grinding away,” she says.

“The Congress just grew,” she adds. “More and more people joined in once they saw that we were getting results with our lobbying. We had a great lobbyist in Mike Ryherd—one of the best—he just gave it his all.”

With the Congress’ tiny budget funded by membership dues, there was only enough money to pay for Mike’s lobbying efforts. Mike recalls, “My experience had been, in both politics and business, that if you give people something, it doesn’t represent as great a value as something they have to actually pay for. And if I was going to represent the Congress, I wanted them to listen to me. We worked out a sum that was quite a bit less than what my corporate clients were paying.” He adds with a chuckle, “I thought the corporate clients were doing well enough, and they could help subsidize low-income housing.”

For many years, the Congress could not afford a staff person. In the earliest years, HDC kicked in some staff support, but the bulk of the work fell to the membership. “The housing congress had nobody running it—just the Chair,” says Carla. “Andy Reid was also Chair early on, Brien Thane after that.... The membership decided that a government employee could not be Chair.”

In recent interviews, Carla, Andy, and Brien all spoke to the intensity of the effort during the early years of the Congress. The core group of people who had originally organized the Housing Congress, gotten it off the ground, and helped ‘move’ the agendas in the legislature “were completely exhausted,” Carla notes. “We were working like crazy. We’d be in Olympia frequently, and we were also running our own organizations.

“We quickly evolved into a group of 30 to 40 people who met every month. And we took ourselves very seriously,” she laughs. “You didn’t skip a Housing Congress meeting! That’s because we all put money in. And we had to make sure it was spent right, with the right positions on all the issues.”

“And the faces of the membership that I see now when I close my eyes were—almost to a person—willing to make personal sacrifices in their lives to make progress in the arena of availability of housing for low-income people.”

Andy Reid was Chair of the Congress in the early 1990s. He is currently assistant dean in the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado, Denver.

Bridging Divides

Andy Reid is now Assistant Dean in the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado, Denver. But in the decade of the 1990s, he served in a role similar to Carla’s, as director of the Spokane Low Income Housing Consortium (SLIHC). It’s been about two decades since he served as the second Chair of the Housing Congress, and he laughs that he can’t say definitely why he was chosen. But Andy acknowledges that, in part at least, having a Spokane-based Chair
of the Congress was a strong affirmation of eastern Washington’s interests getting heard.

Andy had moved to Spokane from Ohio in 1990 to head the brand-new SLIHIC, and “certainly part of my role was to represent Spokane agencies at a statewide and national level—to ensure that Spokane got its fair share of representation and we did it collectively.”

Recalls Andy, “The key players in the Congress were all, for the most part, children of the ’60s or early ’70s, who were motivated by wanting to do good, and who recognized that housing played a central role—probably in everyone’s lives but particularly in the lives of low-income people. We knew that if their housing situation could be stabilized, a lot of the other issues that they were facing could be more easily addressed. And the faces of the membership that I see now when I close my eyes were—almost to a person—willing to make personal sacrifices in their lives to make progress in the arena of availability of housing for low-income people.”

Ray Reickers, the now-retired Housing Opportunities Director with Spokane Neighborhood Action Programs (and former WSHFC Commissioner), has held leadership roles for close to two decades with the Congress and the Alliance. He also emphasizes the synergies created when eastern and western Washington interests were no longer divided by the Cascades. “It had always felt like in Spokane and east of the Cascades, we had a smaller voice. Not least because of our smaller population and the large amounts of money in the I-5 corridor. We were interested in being engaged in the Congress, in part, to show that it was statewide. To show that affordable housing wasn’t just a west of the Cascades issue. And second, adequate money meant that we could develop housing too. We knew it could help spread the resources throughout the state.”

Ray makes an important point about the long-term impact of the dedication of the Congress and later, the Alliance, to growing the HTF, and keeping it both fiscally and operationally healthy. “What I’ve found really valuable, as we maintained our partnership with Commerce and its predecessor, the Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (CTED),” he says, “is that sustaining the Trust Fund and getting policies in place was of as much interest to us, the developers and deliverers of services, as it was to our government partners. That’s been a fantastic partnership: To deliver housing to the people that need it. These were really sharp, intelligent, caring people, who saw the value of having allies in the field, and who crafted their policies so that they worked for everyone.”

RAY REICKERS recently stepped down as Director, Housing Opportunities Division, Spokane Neighborhood Action Programs; he’s currently teaching a social work practicum at Eastern Washington University.
Legislative Successes

The Capital Forum: “The Big Breakthrough”

The Capital Forum Budget Plan, which passed the legislature in 1991, was the giant step that positioned the Congress as a worthy recipient of capital budget priorities. It had taken a full two years to win this battle. We told this story at some length in the December 2005 issue of My View. You can read or revisit it [http://www.wshfc.org/newsletter/2005.12.index.htm#1991] to learn more about the effort it took to place low-income and special needs housing on a par with traditional beneficiaries of this funding, including K-12 and higher education.

Mike Ryherd, who retired in 2007 after 35 years as a lobbyist in Olympia, represented the Congress in these negotiations, pulling together bipartisan support.

Even though, Mike says, affordable housing never got an equal share of the pie in terms of capital budget allocations, “We still got that $50 million. We had gotten our foot in the door. And a jump from $2 million to $50 million.... People were saying, ‘How in the heck did you do that?’”

Mike recalls strong support from Community Action Agencies, particularly those based in the Spokane area that had good relationships with their local legislators. He also remembers strong backing from two Vancouver legislators, Reps. Busenbut and Val Ogden.

“The Capital Forum was the big breakthrough,” says Mike. “From there, it was proving the Housing Trust Fund program, and steadily building it.” One strategy he mentions that helped to incrementally bump up funding allocations was to ask for separate funding for innovative pilot programs: “We would experiment with new items and new types of housing as people came up with their match and identified the need.”

The Housing Trust Fund:
Always at the Top of the Agenda

The Housing Trust Fund is certainly the critical unifying theme, a banner for the membership of the Congress and the Alliance that we could and still do gather under after almost 25 years. Adequate funding for the HTF has perennially stood in the top ranks of

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our legislative priorities over the years; seeking a permanent source of funding for it has been always elusive, but goodness knows, we've tried! Former State Representative and Housing Committee Chair Busse Nutley, the first legislator who attempted to take this on back in 1987, says, "Finding a source of dedicated revenues for the Housing Trust Fund has been the Holy Grail since it was created."

In the early years of the Congress, the membership looked at pursuing a range of revenue sources, including unclaimed lottery prizes, the Real Estate Excise Tax, proceeds from state land sales, airport landing fees, mortgage escrow accounts, a B&O Tax on rental property—the list goes on and on. To me, the drive remains fascinating. Half of these potential sources of funding for the HTF, we're still talking about in 2012.

But because a transformational funding solution has never made it through the legislature, this has meant hard work for the membership every single session, to consistently rearticulate the value of the HTF to ensure that strong funding for it from the Capital Budget continues to be supported.

The Congress’ and Alliance’s ‘asks’ for the HTF slowly grew from 1989, the first legislative session where the memberships’ interests were represented. As part of the Children’s Initiative, $20 million was allocated to the HTF in 1989 to house low-income families with children, homeless youth, and disabled youth. Gary Locke provided leadership for this effort in the House. For the 1990 legislature, the Housing Congress set the bar at $50 million, which was won in 1991, as mentioned above, through the work of the Capital Forum. In 2007 we realized our peak achievement, with $200 million allocated to the HTF for the 2007-2008 biennium.

Over the years, our legislators in Olympia who recognize the critical importance of the HTF, have frequently asked the Alliance membership: What’s the number? When are we going to know we’ve solved the problem? For some 15 years, the number we gave was $100 million. Unfortunately, there is no “magic number” for affordable housing. By the time we’d achieved the $100 million milestone, the need had not stood still. In fact, since the current recession, affordable housing needs have mushroomed; at the same time, allocations to the HTF have shrunk due to our state’s budget crisis.

We keep asking because we know how much it means. These facts are from the Alliance’s current website:

Since 1989, investments in the Housing Trust Fund have leveraged more than $3 billion from private and public sector support to build or preserve more than 36,000 homes across the state. Investments in the Housing Trust Fund create thousands of jobs in residential construction—one of the sectors hit hardest by the recession.

The Housing Trust Fund invests in quality, affordable homes that allow people to improve their lives, while reducing or eliminating their need for social services. Investments in the Housing Trust Fund help to stimulate Washington’s local economies—creating healthier, vibrant and affordable communities across the state.

Brien Thane has an important point to make about the HTF’s contribution to the health of the state’s affordable housing infrastructure. Brien has held about every office with the Congress and later, the Alliance “except Treasurer,” he says. He was Secretary to the Congress Board in ’92 and ’93; from ’93 to ’95 he was Vice President; he served as President from ’95 to ’98. After the transition to the Alliance, he took another stint as President from 2004 to 2007.

"The Trust Fund truly created the means for the nonprofit and public affordable housing community to grow and prosper.”

—BRIEN THANE

…”The Trust Fund truly created the means for the nonprofit and public affordable housing community to grow and prosper,” Brien points out. “An important but overlooked side benefit of the state’s funding for housing and housing programs has been building the

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organizational infrastructure of nonprofits and housing authorities to develop and provide housing—and get incredibly creative: Better ways to develop housing, better ways to incorporate appropriate services and to work with local communities to help them understand that affordable housing for low-income people is a community asset and benefit. It just wouldn’t have been the same if it had all just been implemented by the state.”

Brien, who is currently on a well-earned sabbatical, has provided strong leadership for rural and farmworker housing needs in Washington for many years. He has served as Executive Director of the Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing, and more recently, as Executive Director of the Washington State Farmworker Housing Trust. From the very beginning of his involvement with the newly founded Congress, Brien says, “congress members were great about working to include me and others as part of their commitment to rural issues.”

**A Truly United Front**

I’d like to share one additional observation, this time from Mike Ryherd—and it’s an important one. It has to do with how the Congress and now, the Alliance, have continued to be successful in the challenging and frequently divisive world of state and local politics: They’ve continued to stick together.

“Any time you form a coalition where you’re going after money rather than policy,” Mike observes, “it’s very difficult to keep the group together when you actually start getting some money. And to keep people from saying: ‘I want mine and yours.’

“The members helped set up the HTF so that the best projects are funded—the cream rises to the top. The projects that served the most people with the greatest need got the most points, and those were funded first. You had to be able to raise some money at home and be able to bring it in. And compete with other projects on an empirical scale.

“They’ve been able to say, ‘we need money for shelters, the homeless, special needs people... a whole range of needs....’ And not to get into fights over who got half a percentage more than somebody else. And that is one of the distinct reasons why they’ve been so effective—because they’ve had such a united front.”

**Document Recording Fees: Another Very Significant Win**

Year in and year out for the Alliance and the Congress, getting issues heard and working to get them all the way through the legislature has been the imperative. Many of these have been on the agenda for five years or more. As a membership, we just kept pushing away at them. Tenants’ rights. Funding for housing the homeless. Low-income housing preservation. Farmworker housing. Manufactured housing displacement issues. Certain issues continue to require a powerful voice, and the membership continues to pursue them.

**BRIEN THANE** has held many leadership roles with the Congress and Alliance. Currently on sabbatical, he was most recently executive director of the Washington Farmworker Housing Trust.
"One very significant win for the membership," Brien affirms, "was the Affordable Housing for All Surcharge [HB 2060] that was passed by the legislature in 2002—getting a document recording fee implemented to direct money that could be used either for capital or non-capital purposes to support affordable housing." This was followed in 2005 by an additional recording fee that was targeted at creating solutions for homelessness. In 2007, an additional recording fee was added to support low-income projects across all Washington counties.

"It has been such a valuable tool," says Brien, "in that those three fees can be used for non-capital purposes—as well as the fact that much of the fees generated stay at the county level and are administered by the counties."

The history of this legislative effort goes all the way back to 1989, when King County became the first government entity in the state “to use a real estate excise tax (REET) to create affordable housing opportunities,” explains Kurt Creager. This entity was called the Housing Opportunity Fund. Kurt currently works in the private sector as Director of Housing & Community Development at OTAK; back in 1989 he was running King County’s Housing and Community Development programs.

In 1992, in a late-session effort, the Realtors convinced the legislature that REETs should only be used for infrastructure—not housing, Kurt describes. "They saw other jurisdictions moving in that direction, to capitalize their own local housing trust funds. So they preempted the use of REETs for housing." Housing was no longer an 'eligible use'; King County’s Housing Opportunity Fund was dead.

“This became the document recording fee conversation,” says Kurt. Maureen Kostyack takes up the thread here. Maureen, who is now Housing Program and Development Manager with the City of Seattle Office of Housing, was working with Kurt at King County at the time. When Kurt left to head the Vancouver Housing Authority, "I took over as King County’s representative on the Congress," she says. "This was in the early 1990s. HB 2060 was the first bill that I really worked as a member of the Congress. We pitched it as a Congress lead item and then I personally worked it as a bill. When it was finally passed, it was really something," she laughs. "We’d been working on getting a dedicated funding source for some time.

“During that period,” Maureen remembers, “I remember how we dramatically shifted the strategy. This could not win as a King County bill: It had to be a statewide advocacy effort. In order to get something that benefits local areas, you have to have localities around the state working it together, and therefore you need to have a strong advocacy organization that can make that happen.

“I think that’s truly how we got to the win,” Maureen says. Lynn Davison, who at the time was Executive Director of Common Ground, was also instrumental in brainstorming and...
shepherding this process. “We all worked it as a statewide issue,” says Maureen. “And then we built on it. Since then, we’ve gone back to the well on the document recording fees. Mostly for homeless funding since then; the first bill was for capital dollars. It’s eligible for rental assistance as well, but it was housing. And it’s been a lobbying effort ever since.”

In fact, on March 29th of this year, Governor Gregoire signed into law HB 2048 sponsored by Rep. Phyllis Gutierrez Kenney, which reaffirmed the state’s commitment to ending homelessness by extending the sunset of a $20 document recording fee that had been set to expire in 2013. A new $10 fee was also added.

Because of this document recording fee legislation, a trust fund now exists in every one of Washington’s 39 counties. Says Kurt, “The basic value proposition for the counties is: If you collect the money, you get a piece of this revenue source to use for housing and homelessness—a purpose for which you typically don’t have any other money to serve these needs. It was not a hard sell for a lot of rural counties.” He points out that California still doesn’t have the benefit of funding from document recording fees. “They actually ran a bill this past session that didn’t make it... It’s something we should never take for granted.”

Having these fees administered by the counties, adds Brien, has helped local governments get more involved, both in overseeing this funding, “and in recognizing the value and benefits of affordable housing for lower-income folks in their local community.”

Nick Federici, who has served as the Congress’ and Alliance’s lobbyist since 2000, makes one last fundamental point. “The document recording fees,” says Nick, “developed a very flexible toolbox of solutions at both the city and the local level—to enable them to tether physical housing to the services that the inhabitants of that housing needed. That was a policy step and a thought process step in a progression towards better integration and better diversification of tools.” This has been a very powerful tool for getting people out of homelessness and preventing homelessness. In fact, with the passage of HB 2048, nearly 30,000 more people across the state will get the services they need to exit or avoid homelessness.

The nonprofit Multi-family Low-income Property Tax Exemption: Saving Critical Operating Dollars for Affordable Housing

One of the most substantial accomplishments for the membership over the past two decades is HB 1345, which passed in 1999. It doesn’t directly allocate dollars for low-income housing like the HTF, or create a funding mechanism for them like the document recording fees. Nonetheless, it is one
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held until she became chief of staff for the House Democratic caucus in 2000. Majken’s contributions are valued tremendously by the membership, not only for her tireless in-the-trenches work in the halls of Olympia, but also in the role she took on as mentor to them.

“I remember how undisciplined we were,” says Kathy. “No one really understood how to focus, streamline, and prioritize.” Over time, under Majken’s tutelage, the membership honed down their agendas. “The other thing that Majken really taught us was grassroots lobbying,” Kathy says. “She couldn’t carry all the water for us; she educated us about how to accomplish this ourselves. From her, we learned that legislators are much more likely to listen to the people in their district whom they respect—and who have reached out to them to create a relationship.”

Adds Carla, “Majken worked to get us to realize that we had to be able to work with both sides of the aisle—that our cause appealed to both. I would attribute the success of the Congress to her training.”

Adds Majken, “In the housing arena, the Alliance’s professional members are the experts. Legislators want that direct connection to what’s happening in their district—from people who know about homeless and housing issues. They are a good resource for them. I have rarely met a legislator who doesn’t want to hear what’s happening on the ground in their district.”

of the largest financial commitments secured to date. HB 1345 is a tax exemption that exempts nonprofit-owned multi-family rental properties serving very low-income people from having to pay property taxes.

HB 1345 has helped nonprofit housing organizations improve their bottom lines—enormously. Currently, it’s estimated that this exemption represents a savings of between $12 and $16 million in operating costs each year. This savings enables housing developers to target housing to families at the lower end of the low-income spectrum, and helps these properties to remain financially viable.

As Kathy Roseth explains, the actual value is much higher than that $12-16 million annual figure because those saved dollars can be used to leverage private debt.

This is a battle that was extremely hard-fought. Kathy, who was the Chair of the Congress from 1997 to 1999, tells a remarkable story. Currently Chief Operations Officer at Plymouth Housing Group, she was Executive Director of Lutheran Alliance to Create Housing (LATCH) during that period (LATCH has since become part of Compass Housing Alliance).

As the Congress membership notched its successes in the legislature and grew in size, Kathy recalls, the way in which its lobbyists helped educate and focus and direct the organization was absolutely fundamental to every forward stride. In 1993, Majken Ryherd took over the lobbyist position for the Congress from her father Mike, a role she...
Majken Ryherd was the Congress’ lobbyist from 1993 to 2000. She returned to lobbying two years ago after serving as chief of staff for the House Democratic Caucus in Olympia for 10 years.

Majken drilled the membership about inviting their legislators to visit their housing developments. She told them how to reach out between sessions, to give building tours, to help legislators understand members’ programs, “and know who we are,” says Kathy. “These are the relationships that can be called on when there’s a bill on the floor and you need to get someone’s attention to vote for it. It seems like a simple thing, but it was not intuitive. It was an education process that we went through in the 1990s, and we got better and better at it.”

To pass a bill that would be as impactful as HB 1345, it would take a movement. When Kathy took on the role of Chair in 1997, she describes, the Congress launched a big membership drive. “Jon Gould of the Children’s Alliance is a brilliant organizer, and he lent his talents to what we were trying to do with the Housing Congress at that time. We were reaching out—and our membership grew, and our formal organization grew.” By then, “we had bylaws that actually functioned: who was a member and who could vote. You could pitch of course! By the 1999 election that brought Frank Chopp in as Co-Speaker of the House, we were a much better-disciplined body, and we had created networks of members in non-King County parts of the state that weren’t as present in the early days.”

In a nutshell, you could say that by the late 1990s, the Congress had come of age: The stakeholders were organized; a broad and transparent process was in place by which agendas were narrowed; and the membership had the discipline to stick to those agendas. “I believe those are the characteristics of the Alliance today,” says Kathy.

“The property tax exemption had been on our agenda for years, certainly from 1995 forward,” she says. But it had never made it through the House Finance Committee. “Every year we had found somebody to draft the bill, and every year it had not gotten out, because the Co-Chair of the committee did not want to do it.”

Highest and Best Use Tax Policies Were Destabilizing Nonprofit Housing Properties

The thrust of this bill was the burden that ‘highest and best use’ taxing policies were placing on nonprofit low-income housing developments. Under highest and best use, it made no difference to the tax assessment whether you were a high-end developer commanding sky-high rents, or a nonprofit organization helping low-income people get a leg up by providing housing they could afford. At the close of the 1990s, real estate prices had been escalating dramatically. “Nonprofit projects all over the state were being destabilized by highest and best use taxing policies,” says Kathy.

LATCH had one project that was being hammered by rising property taxes, a multi-family housing development in Bothell called Easternwood, which became the poster child for the Congress’ effort.

Majken’s strategy, Kathy describes, was to enlist the help of the legislators from Easternwood’s district. “We met with all of them, and Rep. Al O’Brien of Mountlake Terrace agreed to sponsor the bill.”

By now, the Congress had gotten smarter. One of the ways they succeeded in getting it out of the House Finance Committee was by making a personal appeal to that Co-Chair, Rep. Brian Thomas of the 5th District. By chance, a Board member of LATCH had actually unsuccessfully run against Rep. Thomas several times, and through it, they’d become
friends. “I called Rep. Thomas’ office,” says Kathy, “and asked for an appointment for the two of us.” The relationship made all the difference. “He listened to us. I was prepared, I knew exactly how much the tax shift would cost—and I had this board member who was saying, ‘this is a really well-managed organization, a coalition of Lutheran Churches.’”

The property tax exemption finally got its hearing in the House Finance Committee, and “we got it out of committee.” Housing Congress members had met with every member of that committee, “and in every one of those meetings, we took a constituent with us, or had someone make a call.”

Ultimately, HB 1345 made it through the House by a vote of 94 to 3. But the Congress was only halfway there. They still had to get it through the Senate.

At that time, the Chair of the Senate’s Ways and Means was Senator Valoria Loveland of Pasco. A Democrat, Senator Loveland, says Kathy, “was completely opposed to tax shifts of any kind because they harmed single family homeowners. She was not going to give us a hearing.” She calls the Senate Ways and Means the ‘Waters of Babylon’ because “that’s where I laid down and wept,” she laughs.

“We were coming up on the deadline. There was no appealing to Senator Loveland—not even from people in her district.” As Kathy tells it, this bill would have died in that committee if House Speaker Frank Chopp had not been willing to spend political capital to make the call to Senate Majority Leader Sid Snyder. The call was made and Senator Loveland gave the go-ahead for a hearing in her Committee.

“The deadline was at 3 and Majken called me at quarter to 3 and said: ‘You’ve got your hearing,’” Kathy says. “We didn’t have time for the full court press—I went and pled our case and we got it out of that committee, and it was passed by the Senate.” At one point, Kathy says, she’d added up the names of people who had participated from all over the state—they numbered in the hundreds.

“It was a great bipartisan effort,” Majken recalls. “Kathy and I worked very closely together on that, we had a lot of people who advocated, and it made a huge difference.” Among the elected officials she credits for lending their support were Rep. Velma Veloria and Rep. Steve Van Luven, who at the time co-chaired the Housing Committee, and Rep. Don Pennington. Champions in the Senate included Senator Lisa Brown. And Peter Steinbrueck, then a member of the Seattle City Council, was active in marshaling the support of Seattle legislators.

Behind every meaningful accomplishment in the legislature are many heroes, much sweat and great toil—and great stories. Every “win” the Congress and Alliance have achieved over the years has its own heroes, its own stories. The most important stories about HB 1345 are those of the people living in the homes that have benefited from its passage: 565 properties targeted to low-income people have benefited in whole or in part from this exemption. Any way you look at it, an enormous number of lives have been impacted.

Fighting for Better Policies and Laws—and Building Better Relationships

When it comes to lobbyists, the Congress and the Alliance couldn’t be more fortunate. I know I can speak for the entire membership when I say that Mike Ryherd, Majken Ryherd, and Nick Federici have been consummate banner-carriers, always eloquently and skillfully in our corner. You could say their dedication and work ethic have been the perfect match for our membership. Nick has been our lobbyist since 2000, and though he represents other clients as well, you’d never know it. He’s always where we need him to be, steadily fighting for the issues that matter.

I asked Nick to talk through some of the most important policy issues he and the membership have tackled in the past dozen years. He makes the point that the Alliance’s ability to “shepherd processes and serve as
the focal point in conversations” makes his job a lot easier. In other words, in representing the Alliance, he knows he has the weight of the entire membership behind him—not “10 different conversations in 10 different parts of the state.” The perspectives and needs of the entire range of Washington communities are represented.

One of the pieces of legislation that Nick says he’s most proud of is what he calls the “Slumlord Accountability Act,” which was passed in 2005 as SB 5577. A particularly squalid and dangerous rental property in Olympia served as the poster child for this effort. The fight was about requiring the landlords of substandard properties to pay for relocation and rental assistance to tenants who needed to find another home when the property was condemned.

There’s not enough room to do this story justice here, but there are so many ramifications to this legislation. Obviously, it’s important in the broader effort to prevent homelessness. And this act has served as a template for local jurisdictions that are working to ensure that tenants have a level playing field in their relationships with property owners in their communities.

Part of Nick’s job is to work with local jurisdictions that are willing to go to bat for tenants in situations like these, to help them tailor and enact targeted local statutes. In some cases, including in Seattle, Olympia, and elsewhere, cities now have enacted further legal remedies. If a landlord refuses to pay the relocation costs for tenants when a property is condemned, the local jurisdiction “can seize and sell the property as a way to recoup their cost of helping the tenants to find safe, healthy, affordable housing,” explains Nick. Nick has also worked with these jurisdictions to help them extend language to cover motels and hotels that house transient populations.

Tenants’ rights, including the rights of manufactured housing owners who rent the land their home sits on, are an ongoing battle for Nick and the Alliance. “Washington law,” he says, “gives all the power to the landlord other than some basic rights. I think a big part of our job at the Alliance is to address that power imbalance and improve fairness and equity for tenants in that relationship. We are committed to that—and it remains one of the seriously unresolved issues.” The most recent legislation supported by the Alliance that chips away at these challenges is SB 6315, The Fair Tenant Screening Act, the first part of which was passed and signed into law in March of this year.

Creating a Collaborative Dialogue with For-Profit Developers

An interesting parallel to the landlord/tenants paradigm, Nick says, is the long-standing misread of nonprofit housing that’s held by many for-profit landlords and developers. “We’ve been looked at by the for-profit development community as competitors, which is unfair. It’s taken a long time to develop a common understanding with that community—that it’s not about competing, it’s about filling needs that the for-profit apartment and building community doesn’t fill, particularly for people with disabilities. For a long time, we were fighting a fairly heated battle with these private sector landlords and builders, who saw their property rights being undermined by what they considered taxpayer-subsidized competition.”

Nick and the Alliance, however, have long argued that their membership fills in where the private market can’t be successful or chooses not to enter. Over the last two years, the Alliance has worked to turn the fight over resources into a collaboration with the private sector—with some degree of success. This conversation arose in debates about the passage of HB 2048, the latest document...
recording fee legislation. Nick and the Alliance found ways to build into the bill language that benefits both landlords and tenants. “Until we did this, there was a fundamental lack of understanding about how document recording fees and housing trust funds were used,” says Nick.

“We looked at the data, and a majority of money, and in some communities all the money from document recording fees, was being used for vouchers in private sector units. Far from being a competitor or undermining them, we were, frankly, delivering income to private sector landlords far more than we were competing with them.” Because of the flexibility in the way these monies can be used by local jurisdictions, these funds can also be used, for example, for case management or other services that would help tenants remain stable in their rental housing unit—in other words, to be more reliable renters.

Another aspect of this ongoing debate is how jurisdictions are making provisions for including low-income housing as they grow and, in many cases, gentrify. This is also a battle that the Alliance continues to take on. Says Nick, “Some local jurisdictions don’t want ‘those people’ to live in their communities. They don’t want low-income folks; they don’t want tax-exempt or public housing. They see it as a blight or as a magnet for police activity and a high cost for their jurisdiction. Or they just want to build upscale housing and enjoy the fruits of high property taxes.

“As part of the give-and-take of expanded development tools, whether it’s exemptions from zoning or tax exemptions or other incentives,” he continues, “we’ve been very assertive in saying that developers need to weigh assumptions for the potential downside of that new development, which is that people in the local community may be priced out.” When local jurisdictions or developers look for expansions to get the authority on what they can build, “we try to be there at the table to say, ‘Sure, we’re willing to work with you on that, but you have to build into your development ways to mitigate or eliminate the negative impact on this community.’”

Nick points to a recent successful collaboration this year in Tacoma, where Pacific Lutheran University wanted to tear down an old warehouse and build market-rate housing in a low-income neighborhood. “We were able to sit down with some of the elected leaders from Tacoma—including Senators Conway and Regala, and Representative Darnielle, all of whom were very excited about helping PLu build this housing. They worked with us to make sure that it was done responsibly—that it accommodated the needs of the people who were living in that community.”
Grassroots Organizing Comes Full Circle

The Washington Low-Income Housing Network

I mentioned at the outset of this history that the Washington Low-Income Housing Network was created by the Congress membership in 1993 to help build a stronger grassroots movement for affordable housing in our state. Why 1993? That was when the opportunity presented itself.

Recalls Carla, “The National Low-Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) had been in existence for a long time, lobbying for legislation at the federal level. It was getting harder to do so because they didn’t really have good outreach into the grassroots at the state and local level. They knew they needed to build that network to make themselves more effective.”

In 1993 the NLIHC received some foundation grant money targeted to building state-wide advocacy capacity around the country—enough funding for 10 states. “To be able to get the grant, we had to have a 501(c)3 to receive it,” says Carla, “so we set up the Network to be that entity and receive the money.” As Carla recalls, it was a fairly substantial grant, on the order of about $100,000 per year for three years. Carla and Maureen Howard, then on the board of NLIHC and chair of the WA Coalition for the Homeless, and formerly the Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity of Washington State, applied for that three-year grant.

After they successfully won it, Maureen Kostyack continues, “We set up an initial board of Congress members and then held an election. The whole idea was to get a greater diversity of voices—geographically, issue-wise, and certainly a diversity of race and ethnicity—that would better represent the people who were assisted by the housing programs we were advocating for. The people we were looking for were those that the Congress, by its design as an organization of housing professionals, did not have.”

The Network was officially created in February 1993 and opened its Seattle office in July; the new Director was Kris Zawisza, and the board members were Kurt Creager, Maureen Kostyack, Andy Reid (President), Gary Clark (then with Seattle Dept. of Housing & Human Services) and Ken Katahira (then with Inter*Im Community Development Association). The original make-up of the Network’s board had much in common with the Congress’ board; that changed over time. One strong connection between the two organizations was in the staffing that the Network was able to provide; the Congress contracted with the Network to cover some of its administrative responsibilities.

Linda Hugo, currently Executive Director of Community Frameworks, joined the Housing Network in the mid-1990s with a fresh perspective. At that time, Linda represented Northwest Regional Facilitators, a nonprofit affordable housing developer and capacity

“The whole idea was to get a greater diversity of voices—geographically, issue-wise, and certainly a diversity of race and ethnicity—that would better represent the people who were assisted by the housing programs we were advocating for.”

— MAUREEN KOSTYACK
The cultures of the Congress and the Network had been developing in different directions, Linda explains. Over time, she says, as both boards evolved, they reached a point where no members held a role on both. At a certain point, Linda says, “We decided we would have at least two members that would serve on both boards. I was one.” Brien Thane also served in that capacity.

Carla remembers the years when Ginger Segel served as Executive Director for the Network (1998-2000) as particularly strong. “They focused on low-income people—and what the issues were for renters; through Ginger’s contacts, the organization was able to identify renters in all the different districts who could go to Olympia and testify. She really started to integrate the Network back with the Congress’ lobbying efforts.”

But Ginger left the organization to focus on her work for LIHI in 2000. And, ever since the NLIHC grant’s term had ended, the Network faced the perennial challenge faced by grassroots organizations—need to rely for financial support from a base of people and organizations that are, by definition, themselves financially stressed.

“The Network was trying to create a network of more local consortiums; it was very much more grassroots,” Linda says. “We tended to have people from outside the I-5 corridor; our membership tended to draw from smaller organizations. And we ran like a more traditional nonprofit.” She adds, “There was certainly the sense that we could all become more powerful if the Network and the Congress were more coordinated. But because of the cultural and attitudinal differences that grew over time, there was a certain amount of stress between the two. Sharing board members helped.”

In terms of their vision of carrying out educational and informational activities, and building a broad-based and diverse statewide coalition dedicated to developing and preserving low-income housing, “we at the Network were successful at the time in raising awareness of the issues,” Linda says. “This is important work, but the way it’s accomplished has evolved. The original vision began with that large grant, with the intention of building smaller regional networks throughout the state.”

Seattle/King County, Spokane, and several other more populous areas continue to have strong regional coalitions, Linda points out. There were tentacles of outreach to other communities, but what the Network membership learned was that “you need a certain critical mass of support organizations, along with resources, to be sustainable. So the original idea never truly took hold to the degree it was envisioned when the Network was created.”
Forging a New Alliance:  
The Congress and the Network Merge

By the early 2000s, the memberships of the Network and Congress had begun a lengthy dialogue about the opportunities presented by a merger. Lynn Davison, then Executive Director of Common Ground, was the Chair of the Congress; Linda was her counterpart with the Network. Both organizations saw the potential. For the Network’s membership, it was critical that the broader base of voices that they’d brought into the movement would continue to be nurtured and sustained. They also wanted to ensure that advocacy on federal issues, which was part of the Network’s mission, would continue. What followed was a lengthy dialogue between both memberships over the course of several years.

“We realized that if we could just work through the cultural differences,” says Linda, “we could probably be a lot stronger. And the thinking started to change about how we could be more of a movement. That became more important than what the organization looked like. And gradually, that did take hold. It still was a fairly long process. But once we started thinking in that new way, it made a whole lot more sense.”

The two organizations officially merged to become the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance on August 5, 2003. Carla Okigwe was named Board President. “The merger significantly strengthened our state focus as a membership,” Brien Thane reflects. As well, he says, the Alliance made a commitment to preserve the Network’s federal advocacy. “Early on we developed a set of principles for our federal advocacy—what legislation we would support and what we’d oppose. NLIHC told us that we were the first state in the country that actually came up with an affordable housing federal agenda.”

In today’s Alliance, Linda points out, one can see the entire spectrum of interests represented. “There are individual consortiums represented on the board which are very strong pieces of the statewide organization. But there’s also a recognition, in the areas that can’t sustain those, that there still needs to be a way of reaching out to organizations in those locations—as well as getting out to local communities and their own political systems and the people that live there. I think the Alliance is now a lot more sophisticated about understanding how that needs to work.”

With the merger, the Alliance took over the Network’s 501(c)3 corporation; the Congress’ 501(c)4 was placed on hold. One critical challenge in operating as a 501(c)3 corporation is that only 20% of expenditures can be used for lobbying. “The question was,” says Carla, “given the cost of the lobbying that the Congress was doing, was the Alliance’s budget big enough?” That question hung in the air, figuratively at least, for several years until the Alliance’s finances gained stronger footing with new leadership from its most recent executive directors, Ben Gitenstein and Rachael Myers, beginning in 2006.
Carrying the Work Forward

The Congress, in fact, remained alive—on paper—until earlier this year. “We had a little phone call board meeting,” Carla laughs. “The three remaining officers of the Congress turned over the remaining hundred dollars that was left in the account to the Alliance.” The symbolism of this move is certainly not lost on Carla. The Alliance set its sights on building a broad-based movement, but has never lost sight of its roots in taking that advocacy to the legislature. Lobbying is an integral part of the Alliance’s function. Says Carla, “They’ve taken it over completely: It’s not an extra arm glued onto them.”

And the Congress’ 501(c)4 organization has been brought back to life as a sister organization to the Alliance, to help the membership strengthen its advocacy efforts by being active in electoral campaigns. Launched earlier this year, this new offshoot is called the Housing Alliance Action Fund (HAAF). With the creation of HAAF, advocacy for substantive change has truly come full circle. As you’ll read in the pages that follow, in recent years, the Alliance has both successfully expanded its base through its commitment to reaching out to people all over the state, while continuing to build on its successes in the legislature.

Not only, says Brien, has the Alliance “become smarter and more creative in our advocacy. But we had the dream that we could move from being just an advocacy organization to truly being a movement for affordable housing. It took a lot of work to figure out what that meant and how to go about it, but in the past several years with the great staff we have, we’ve really started to make that happen. It’s transformed us from an association of a 100-plus housing organizations to truly a movement of thousands of Washington residents communicating with their legislators.”

And the results are showing up in Olympia. As Brien points out, in recent years, in legislative committee hearings on affordable housing issues, a major portion of the testimony has been coming from people who have been able to improve their lives because they were able to secure affordable housing.
An Inclusive Movement for Affordable Housing in Washington State: The Alliance Today

The Alliance has legitimately become a movement for affordable housing in our state—with a great deal of momentum.

While reflecting on his work with the Congress in the earlier years, Kurt Creager had this to say: “What’s gratifying for someone like me is you can do this work—and you can come back in 25 years, and it’s still going. It’s like planting a forest.” Kurt also speaks to the benefits that have come from the Alliance’s leadership transitions. “The Alliance is a sustainable organization, new people are bringing new ideas and energy. Those of us who have been around for a while—we have the presence of mind to stand down. It’s great to see other people grow into those positions.”

Transforming the Alliance into a Movement-Builder

By the mid-2000s, the Alliance had built a strong track record in Olympia. Membership levels were at their highest. Yet its finances were on a very shaky footing. And though the membership had by no means lost their compass, the Alliance was sorely in need of discipline, inspiration—and direction.

Though he served as Executive Director for less than two years, from 2006 to mid-2008, Ben Gitenstein moved mountains in the work of renewing the Alliance. The transformative process he boldly launched and led helped build the momentum that continues to propel the Alliance today.

Back in 2005, Carla had hired Ben to direct state and federal policy advocacy for HDC. As part of his role, he had become HDC’s representative on the Alliance board. “The more I got involved,” Ben recalls, “the more it became clear that the Alliance just wasn’t on a sustainable path.” Ben had barely gotten his feet wet at HDC, but the stakes were high.

The executive director of the Alliance from 2006 to mid-2008, BEN GITENSTEIN now works in new products strategy at Microsoft.

This ‘history’ could have been a book; confined to the space of a newsletter, I can only highlight key accomplishments and transitions. Scores of important contributors to the growth, success, and vitality of the Alliance, including individual supporters, board members and officers, staff members, and legislators and other elected officials, remain unsung. Yet I know all of them have that satisfaction, as I do, of helping to plant a forest.

Kurt’s comments are the perfect introduction to the last half-dozen years of the Alliance. The Alliance has deepened and reached out to a much broader membership under our two most recent Executive Directors, Ben Gitenstein and Rachael Myers. Who knows where we’d be today without their passionate leadership?
When Ben was offered the position of executive director of the Alliance in early 2006, “It took a lot of guts on Carla’s part, because she had just hired me as advocacy director. And it was risky on my part because when I joined, the first thing I found was that there was even less money than we thought,” he laughs.

“When I took the job,” Ben recalls, “I said to the board, ‘I won’t take it if you’re hiring me as a caretaker. If you’re not up for transformation, get somebody else and we’ll figure out a different strategy.’” Ben credits Megan Hyla’s work as a staffer in helping the Alliance function successfully in the years prior to his stepping in. “She had been essentially the heart and soul of the Alliance for that time period,” he says.

The first thing Ben did was to hire Amy Clark as deputy director. “I told Amy, I don’t know if I can promise you a long-term job, because I don’t know how long we’ll be able to keep the lights on.” Ben and Amy (who left in 2011 to become Communications Director of the NLIHC) made some budget cuts, and “brought in some new voices who would prove to be very important to the Alliance,” remembers Ben. “One of whom was Donald Chamberlain.”

At that time, Donald was Director of Programs for Building Changes. “Donald,” says Ben, “applied accounting rigor to our budgeting and finance projections. This showed very clearly where the money was going—and we were coming up short every month. I think one of the hardest things in this kind of transformation is getting everyone to understand that there is a big problem, and Donald played an amazing role in getting us all to see the truth.”

The Alliance board saw where things stood. But where, as a membership, were they going to set their sights? Ben recalls how he and Amy put this question to the board early on: What is the Alliance uniquely positioned to do?—What can we do that no one else can? The Alliance had two options, he says. One was to cut its staff and shrink down its budget to solely pay for Nick Federici’s lobbying work. “That would be a sustainable future, though it would be a smaller vision for the Alliance.”

It was the second possible path that ignited the board. “The other vision was, ‘Let’s try to be a movement-building organization that reaches out to support the various consortia, doing statewide outreach, thinking about state policy as well as federal policy. Let’s try to grow in staff and grow in size so that we can register voters, start doing messaging work, start producing papers—do all the stuff that you do when you’re trying to build a movement.’ What we quickly found was that’s what everyone wanted. We didn’t want just a trade association of lobbyists. We all wanted a movement-builder.”

“Once the board made that decision, Ben particularly credits Donald Chamberlain, along with Jon Gould of the Children’s Alliance, in mentoring him, serving as relationship brokers to go after funding, and helping the vision take shape.

“What we quickly found was that’s what everyone wanted. We didn’t want just a trade association of lobbyists. We all wanted a movement-builder.”

—Ben Gitenstein
The Washington Low Income Housing Alliance • October 2012

The Alliance and Campion Foundation Map Out a Strategy

What happened next was the miracle event that most organizations only dream of: A funder came along who embraced the vision the Alliance offered, and agreed to help support the work of bringing the vision to fruition.

It all started when Donald Chamberlain introduced Ben and the Alliance to the Campion Foundation.

In Ben’s words, “the folks at the Campion Foundation showed a tremendous amount of foresight. They said to us, ‘You’re the only organization that can do this job. But you are understaffed, under-resourced, and under-thought—you haven’t done the thinking yet to figure out how you’re going to approach this problem.’ They made it clear from the beginning that we were a strategic partner for them.”

“Leadership is everything,” says Campion Foundation Trustee Sonya Campion. Sonya and her husband Tom co-founded the Campion Foundation in 2005. When they chose to take on ending homelessness as a cornerstone of Campion’s mission soon thereafter, Sonya recalls, “We rolled our sleeves up and started looking at how best to get involved. Advocacy is our clear focus because it’s the highest leverage point.” That’s a hard decision to make, she adds, “because it means that you’re turning away from the immediate need, and looking long term.”

And it was a sign to us of an organization that was really healthy. The board had completely bought into that plan.

What came next was an intensive process of figuring out what it would take to execute the Alliance’s vision. Ben and the board worked closely with Don André, Associate Director of the Campion Foundation. “The plan was multi-faceted; it involved building a lot of capacity,” Sonya says. “They fleshed out the plan, what it would cost, was it thorough enough—they really unpacked it, looking out over the next three to five years.”

Adds Ben, “Campion worked with us to get us up to a level of strategy evolution.” They looked at the weaknesses and risks as well as the potential: “what impact we could make if we could execute our strategy.”

“I was really proud of that work,” says Sonya. That was the point at which the Alliance and Campion presented the plan to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Partnership with the Campion and Gates Foundations

What followed was a different kind of conversation, Ben recalls. “It was not a conversation about a nonprofit asking for money. It was a conversation between organizations who wanted to achieve the same change in the world, helping to figure out how to work together.”

SONYA CAMPION is a trustee of the Campion Foundation.

Sonya describes finding a very high caliber of nonprofit developers and service providers working in affordable housing and homelessness. “But we didn’t see anyone other than paid staff involved in advocacy. And I thought, ‘we are never going to make progress if more people don’t understand the issue and really come out for it.’ And then along came Ben and the Alliance.”

Continues Sonya, “I credit Ben and the Alliance at the time, for truly stepping back and looking forward. The plan they came up with, to take the Alliance from a trade organization serving members to a powerful advocacy leader ... that to us was very exciting.
The end result was an initial grant to the Alliance for $750,000, split 50-50 between Campion and Gates, to fund the Alliance’s capacity building efforts over a three-year period, beginning in mid-2008. Sonya makes the point that “this was a significant grant for us. A big business plan, a huge transformation. The business plan costed-out higher than we ever imagined. But the Alliance is aiming high. Not just pushing for incremental changes. To have equity and fairness and affordability in housing be a non-negotiable, permanent value in our community, you need a wide variety of people advocating for it.”

Since that three-year period of the initial grant ended, the partnership has continued. Both Campion and Gates have continued to provide substantial funding to the Alliance for general operating support. This support, says Sonya, must be seen in the context of the work undertaken. “They took on a big, big vision. This is not just a new foundation dumping dollars on them. And the success of the Alliance is really important to Gates’ goals of ending homelessness.”

As Ben points out, the beauty of the general operating dollars “allowed us to think long term. That was just incredibly powerful.” As anyone who has ever run a nonprofit knows, it’s virtually impossible to conceive and execute a far-reaching vision if you’re worried about paying last month’s bills. And the credibility with other funders and philanthropists that this partnership with Campion and Gates gives to the Alliance’s efforts doesn’t hurt either. “Just by adding their imprimatur to the Alliance masthead—they made every interaction we had so much better.”

The partnership with Campion has continued to deepen, as the Alliance has taken over the execution of a Campion-spearheaded initiative called the Board Advocacy Project. The point of this work is to educate boards about the role public policy plays in the financial health of their organization and, describes Sonya, “their fiscal responsibility as board members to protect and leverage those assets.” The goal is to mobilize board members across the state and to utilize the influence they have with elected officials in advocating for affordable housing and ending homelessness.

Changing of the Guard: From Strength to Strength

Looking back, it’s simply amazing at how far down the path of transformation the Alliance already was when Ben stepped down after less than two years. He had applied to the University of Washington to get his MBA early into his tenure as executive director. When he was accepted, he deferred making the change for one year. I remember trying to talk Ben into staying; so many of us did. His assessment was and is that “I’m really good at helping a group of people solve a problem together, working through complex and ambiguous situations and structuring solutions.” He claims that day-to-day management and execution are not his strengths. Ben now works in new products strategy at Microsoft.

He points to several of the legislative and policy achievements he’s most proud of that he worked to build a consensus for among a broad coalition of housing, homelessness,
 homeownership, and human services advocates. These include the HTF reaching the $100 million per annum mark, and work toward the passage (in 2006) of enabling legislation for incentive programs that support expanded low-income housing development in exchange for zoning modifications for developers under the GMA. As well, Ben points to the Alliance’s “building relationships with conservation and land-use folks, and using those relationships to be able to speak with one voice, to connect the dots between housing and homelessness and helping the environment.”

For Ben, there were several defining moments where he says he recognized “this is what a movement looks like”—including an event he attended at which Governor Gregoire unveiled a portion of the state’s budget. “The focus of the event was on the need to invest in housing,” Ben recalls. “It wasn’t just us at the Alliance saying, ‘Hey, can we talk about housing now?’ Affordable housing was the centerpiece topic of the event. We went from not knowing if we would be able to pay our electric bill to playing a huge role in deciding the state budget in three years. That was awesome.”

Through the process of leaving his post at the Alliance, he says, “the most important thing we gained was to somehow convince Rachael to take the job.” Before joining the Alliance, Rachael Myers been on the staff of the homeless street paper Real Change; Rachael had been doing advocacy and organizing work with the vendors—and, she says, “working to turn our readers into activists.”

Rachael reflects that her experience as an organizer was “the Alliance’s way of saying, ‘Okay, we’re going to go in this direction of truly trying to build a movement.’” That’s part of the story, but there’s far more to it than that. No one involved with the Alliance can imagine how anyone could fill all of the demands of her Executive Director role as capably as Rachael does.

Sonya adds two observations. “I’ve seen organizations crash and burn with a leadership transition,” she says, “but this transition was fairly painless. That’s when you know the vision is truly part of the bloodstream of the organization.” And, she adds, “Rachael is a phenomenal leader. She’s taken it all on, including the Alliance’s merger with the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH), with grace, tenacity, and a focused forwardness that’s truly impressive. Rachael is the leader the Alliance has needed for all the things that have come their way.”

Infusing—and Aligning—Advocacy

Plenty has come the Alliance’s way since Rachael became executive director in June 2008; the Alliance leadership, board, and membership are all making that happen.

In the past four years, the Alliance has: grown in staffing; expanded its membership; helped pass important legislation; reconfigured its board to allow room for new leaders to get involved; set its sights on diversifying its funding to be more sustainable; launched new education and communication initiatives; and created new vehicles, including the Housing Alliance Action Fund, for pushing for its political agenda.

Certainly one the most significant new developments was the Alliance’s merger with the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH) that officially took place in October 2011.

The point of this merger was, Rachael says, “to strengthen the work.” The merger was the result of conversations that had been taking place in recent years and “last year it finally became the right time.” After a six-month period of working through details with several board members from both
organizations, “we voted to approve the merger with the idea that our issues were so intertwined already—we worked so closely together on legislation—and we believed that we would be more powerful and more effective as a unified movement.”

With the merger, the Alliance now takes the lead in advocating for the continuum of homeless and low-income housing needs across the state. And, earlier this year, the Alliance sponsored the 22nd annual Conference on Ending Homelessness, which has been one of the Homeless Coalition’s major efforts over the years. The turnout was the highest in several years, and Rachael says she believes the conference met the goals originally set by the Homeless Coalition, including a strong focus on training service providers. The Alliance also seized the opportunity, she says, “of having all these great people who care about ending homelessness in one place to infuse some advocacy into the conference.”

To use Sonya’s phrasing, building a movement is in the bloodstream of the Alliance, and truly what drives Rachael and the organization. “The core of our work will always be grounded in our organizational members,” Rachael explains, “because that’s where we get our information about what’s needed in our communities—that’s a deep source of our expertise.

“We’re creating a groundswell of folks who care about affordable housing.”

—RACHAEL MYERS

An Array of Tools

One of the means they’ve had to accomplish this, she points out, is the growth in the Alliance staff, made possible by the general operating support grants from Campion and Gates. The Alliance currently has eight staff members, including Rachael, and is in the process of hiring two more. “The biggest source of our power is in mobilizing people in communities all over the state. We realized that we needed to put more staff resources towards that.” The Alliance currently has a mobilization coordinator, a mobilization manager, and a half-time person who focuses on grassroots work. And, one of the open positions is targeted to statewide outreach on homeless issues.

The Alliance has also bumped up its staffing in the area of policy research and development. “Now, when our members tell us the barriers to meeting their mission or providing housing in their communities, we can work with them to develop the policy solutions.”

The Alliance, she says, works extensively with the NLHIC and its state partners’ group, to bring more policy capacity to their state legislative work, including sharing successful legislative models.

There’s a further objective for the expanded staff development. One staff position is devoted to keeping a steady focus on donor issues and “making sure that we communicate well with our donors.” Rachael and the board recognize the importance of expanding
the Alliance’s funding base. “We’ve appreciated the great support from the Gates and Campion Foundations—but relying on two funders for such a big portion of our budget isn’t sustainable. We’re working hard on building our support from individual donors.” This is a multi-pronged effort, which includes bringing in new members, as well as engaging individual philanthropy on a broader level. She points out that the number of individuals who have made a financial contribution to the Alliance has more than quadrupled over the past four years.

When reaching out to build a larger community of support, effective communications are a valuable tool. One element of the Alliance’s communications strategy is developing and utilizing messaging on affordable housing issues that resonates with people in our state. This is work that began with Ben Gitenstein and Amy Clark and still continues. Says Rachael, “most people understand housing at a values level. But advocates frequently slip into talking about complicated policy and legislation before making that fundamental connection.”

The Alliance has conducted training efforts in utilizing the right messages, and the leadership is considering doing another round of message evaluation next year. “That’s a big value that the Alliance has brought in, just helping people learn how to talk about and present these issues.”

And the Alliance leadership itself is shifting and redeploying its people assets. ‘Lifers’ like me, some of us who have served on the board since the founding of the Congress, are making way for new ideas, energy, and leadership potential. Last December, the board voted term limits into the Alliance’s by-laws. Says Rachael, “to grow leadership in any community, you need to have a way for new leaders to come up and get involved and take on that role. We’ve got all kinds of people who are getting involved in the organization in different ways; we want there to be a path for them to continue to evolve in their leadership with the organization.” In short, the board is becoming more balanced, with fewer housing professionals and more people who can contribute other areas of expertise, including fundraising, advocacy, and community organizing.

The good news is that there is plenty of important work to go around. Many of those who are winding their terms down on the board, including Maureen and Brien, continue to be involved with the Alliance’s State Legislative Committee, where they can put valuable policy expertise to good use.

“Rachael is the leader the Alliance has needed for all the things that have come their way.”

—SONYA CAMPION

Fostering New Leadership—and New Ways of Leading

In all the ways mentioned above, and in many others, the Alliance has come of age. Smart, effective people are building the strategies needed to get us closer to the Alliance’s vision of seeing all Washington residents have the opportunity to live in safe, healthy, affordable homes in thriving communities.

I’ve already talked about the new Housing Alliance Action Fund launched earlier this year. The Fund’s President, Irene Basloe Saraf, who coordinated housing policy for the Congress about a dozen years ago, leads this effort. The Action Fund will enable its membership to endorse legislative candidates who have taken a strong stand on affordable housing. They’re “starting small and supporting a small number of really great candidates this year and hoping to grow it over the next couple of years by the time we get to the next election,” says Rachael.
Two Final Observations

First, from Ben Gitenstein, on the sheer hugeness and complexity of the task that the Alliance is taking on:

“The Alliance is an organization that doesn’t have to exist. It doesn’t provide any ‘services’ to people. It exists solely because there’s a group of organizations that are trying to solve a problem together, and a group of people who see the value that those organizations provide. They see the scope and size of the problem that the state has, and they fundamentally believe there’s a different way to do things.

“I don’t mean to be at all critical of organizations that provide services, but it’s frequently easier to raise money when you have a tangible thing you do that you can measure. The Alliance does something that’s much harder, which is to say, ‘We are going to try to push policymakers to make more progressive investments in other human beings.’ In that sense, the Alliance has an incredibly difficult job.”

What remains to be said? Just this: That in the eyes of the Alliance membership, there’s so much that still needs to be done. The road ahead is long. As Nick Federici says, “It’s still a tough place to be low-income, unemployed, at risk, vulnerable, old, ill, or what have you; hopefully we’ve made it less scary and dangerous for a lot of people, but the challenge is still tremendous. We can never rest on our laurels because so much remains to be accomplished.”

“To grow leadership in any community, you need to have a way for new leaders to come up and get involved and take on that role.”

—RACHAEL MYERS
Stronger Together: The merger of Washington State Coalition for the Homeless with Washington Low Income Housing Alliance was celebrated in October 2011.
Washington Low Income Housing Alliance—
Policy Bills

In addition to supporting significant appropriations for affordable housing and homeless programs, the Congress/Alliance has supported many important policy bills over the years. Below is a partial list of the housing and homeless policy bills supported by the Congress/Alliance that have been passed by the Legislature.

1990

- **HB 2861**: Regulation of Manufactured Housing
- **HB 2272**: Mobile Home Landlords
- **HB 2907**: Mobile Home Relocation Bill

1993

- **ESHB 1562**: Authorizing local governments to exceed statutory property tax limitations for the purpose of financing affordable housing.
- **EHB 1824**: Authorizing conversion of surplus public property to use for affordable housing.

1994

- **HB 2160**: Authorizing public housing authorities to do background checks on employees that work with vulnerable populations.
- **HB 2190**: Allowing Tribes access to the Housing Trust Fund and allowing repayments to be used for administration costs up to 4%.

1995

- **HB 1611**: Exempting the sales tax on new construction materials for youth shelters.
- **ESSB 5868**: Reactivating the mobile home relocation program and allowing $1.3 million in the fund, and interest, to be used for relocation costs.
- **2SSB 5387**: Providing tax incentives for multiple-unit housing in urban centers (Tacoma Bill).

1996

- **HB 2778**: Providing an exemption from sales and use taxes for farmworker housing.
- **SB 6247**: Increasing the debt limit of the Housing Finance Commission to $2 billion.

1997

- **HB 1928**: Giving the Housing Finance Commission authority to impose covenants running with the land.
- **HB 2189**: Creating a task force to study financing for senior housing and housing for persons with disabilities.

1998

- **HB 2598**: Eliminating the sunset on the property tax exemption for leased shelters for homeless families and victims of domestic violence.
- **SB 5622**: Making permanent the sales tax exemption on the construction of youth shelters.
- **SB 6380**: Increasing the amount of relocation grant assistance to owners of double-wide homes and amending the mobile home installer certification act.
- **SB 6737**: Giving a property tax exemption to property owned or leased by a nonprofit organization for persons with developmental disabilities.

- **SB 5193**: The sales and use tax exemption is extended to agricultural employee housing provided by housing authorities, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations.
- **SB 5529**: Requiring a landlord to provide a written receipt for any payment made by a tenant.
- **SB 5672**: Designated public housing projects are added as drug-free zones where the penalties for drug-free related crimes are doubled.
- **SB 6094**: The multifamily housing tax exemption is expanded to allow cities with a population of at least 100,000 to be eligible.
1999

- **SHB 1345**: Exempting certain low-income housing from property taxes.
- **HB 1378**: Amending the Mobile Home Landlord-Tenant Act to require managers to notify tenants of their intention to enter the mobile home and to place security deposits into an interest-bearing account to benefit the tenant.
- **E2SHB 1493**: Establishing a collaborative effort to address the housing needs of homeless children and their families.
- **E2SSB 5843**: Increasing the Housing Finance Commission’s statutory debt limit to $3 billion.
- **ESSB 5599**: Requiring state agencies to adopt joint rules for farmworker housing and operating standards for temporary worker housing.
- **SB 5584**: Creating the Washington Housing Policy Act and the Affordable Housing Advisory Board.

2000

- **HB 2505**: The multifamily tax exemption is lowered from 100,000 to 50,000 population jurisdictions.
- **EHB 3105**: Authorizing a vote on a sales and use tax increase in Tacoma with revenues to be used for zoos, parks, and housing for the mentally ill.
- **SSB 6663**: Enhancing notification procedures for Section 8 housing and authorizing DCTED to adopt eligibility criteria for affordable housing.

2001

- **HB 2098**: The nonprofit property tax exemption for low-income rental units is expanded to include spaces in mobile home parks.
- **HB 2222**: Providing emergency earthquake and low-income energy assistance.
- **SB 5197**: Housing’s share of annual Bond Cap is increased from 30% to 32%.
- **ESSB 5703**: Modifying manufactured home provisions regarding what is or is not an alteration.

2002

- **HB 2060**: Creating a $10 document recording fee surcharge.
- **SHB 2466**: The multifamily tax exemption requirement is reduced from 50,000 to 30,000 for participating jurisdictions.
- **2SSB 5354**: Amending the Mobile Home Relocation Act to cover demolition and replacement expenses in cases where the home cannot be successfully moved.
- **SB 5965**: An additional real estate excise tax is authorized for counties for the development of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income persons and those with special needs.

2003

- **HB 1786**: Amending the Mobile Home Landlord-Tenant Act relating to fire and safety standards, and providing that eviction is covered by the Act.
- **SB 5224**: Adding a representative of for-profit rental housing owners to the Affordable Housing Advisory Board.
- **ESB 5389**: Providing conditions for housing to be designated as “drug and alcohol free.”

2004

- **2EHB 1645**: Protecting the rights of victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking in the rental of housing.
- **2ESSB 5536**: Expanding implied condominium warranties to the extent of defective materials, sound engineering and construction, workmanship, and compliance with all laws.
- **SB 5869**: Authorizing nonprofit corporations to participate in self-insurance risk pools.
2005

- **EHB 1074**: Increasing the administrative cap on the Housing Trust Fund from 4% to 5%.
- **ESHB 1640**: Providing a dispute mechanism for manufactured/mobile home landlord and tenant disputes.
- **E2SHB 2163**: Establishing a homeless housing program and providing a $10 document recording surcharge.
- **ESSB 5509**: Requiring sustainable building guidelines for affordable housing funded in the Capital Budget-Housing Trust Fund.
- **ESSB 5577**: Providing relocation assistance to tenants of dwellings that fail to meet the state’s health and safety standards under the Residential Landlord Tenant Act.
- **SSB 5767**: Creating a homeless housing task force in each county to develop a 10-year plan addressing short- and long-term housing solutions for the homeless.

2006

- **E2SHB 2418**: Authorizing the dissolution of joint housing authorities and creating the Interagency Council on Homelessness.
- **ESHB 2984**: GMA planning jurisdictions may enact or expand affordable housing incentive programs providing for the development of low-income housing.

2007

- **E2SHB 1461**: The Manufactured/Mobile Home Disputes Resolution Program is established in the office of the Attorney General.
- **E2SHB 1359**: The Affordable Housing for All Surcharge of $10 is established on recorded documents for the benefit of housing and homeless programs.
- **HB 1450**: Expanding the multifamily tax exemption to rental properties owned or used by nonprofits and directing assessors to consider restrictions on ownership income or rights.
- **E2SHB 1910**: Lowering the multifamily property tax exemption population to cities of 15,000, changing the term to 12 years for properties with set-asides for low- or moderate-income households and eight years for market-rate properties, and requiring annual reporting.
- **2SHB 1922**: Creating the Independent Youth Housing Program for youth aged 18 to 23 who have exited the state dependency system.

2008

- **E2SHB 1621**: Preserving manufactured/mobile home communities.
- **SHB 2279**: Prohibiting discrimination against affordable housing developments by cities and counties.
- **EHB 3142**: Creating the affordable housing and community facilities Rapid Response Loan Program.
- **ESSB 5959**: Providing assistance to individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of being homeless.
- **SB 6335**: Appropriating an additional $6 million for the Washington Families Fund.

2009

- **EHB 1464**: Modifying affordable housing incentive programs in GMA planning jurisdictions.
- **SHB 1663**: Creating relocation rights for tenants in transient lodging.
- **HB 2331**: Increasing the Homeless and Housing document recording surcharge from $10 to $30.
- **SB 5452**: Increasing the debt limit of the Housing Finance Commission to $6 billion.
- **ESB 5810**: Creating a meet and confer requirement and extending the time before foreclosure can proceed by 30 days on deeds of trust.
2010

- **E2SHB 2658**: Refocusing the Department of Commerce, including transferring programs.
- **ESHB 2753**: Creating the Washington Works housing program.
- **E2SHB 2782**: Creating the Disability Lifeline Program.

2011

- **2SHB 1128**: Providing support for eligible foster youth up to age 21.
- **2SHB 1362**: The Foreclosure Fairness Act, protecting homeowners from foreclosures, requiring mediation, and extending the time before foreclosure can begin.
- **SHB 1793**: Restricting access to juvenile records.
- **SHB 1811**: Allowing for informed telephonic consent for access to housing or homeless services.
- **ESHB 2082**: Creating the Housing and Essential Needs (HEN) program.
- **SB 5289**: Amending the B & O tax deduction for property management companies for personnel performing on-site functions.
- **ESSB 5834**: Using King County lodging taxes for the arts, culture, heritage, tourism, and housing.

2012

- **EHB 1398**: Creating an exemption from impact fees for low-income housing.
- **ESHB 2048**: The $30 surcharge for local homeless housing is temporarily increased to $40 and extended.
- **SHB 2194**: Making significant modifications to the Manufactured/Mobile Home Landlord Tenant Act.
- **ESHB 2592**: Allowing foster youth aged 18 to 21 who are enrolled in a postsecondary program to qualify for extended foster care services.
- **ESHB 2614**: Making technical amendments to the Foreclosure Fairness Act.
- **SHB 2640**: Emphasizing cost-effectiveness in the Housing Trust Fund.
- **SSB 6167**: Providing free criminal record checks to nonprofit organizations that provide emergency shelter or transitional housing for children or vulnerable adults.
- **SSB 6277**: Amending the multifamily property tax exemption in unincorporated urban centers and requiring the rental or sale of at least 20% of the units to low and moderate-income households.
- **SSB 6315**: The Fair Tenant Screening Act, providing screening protections for tenants and notice of adverse actions, and creating a stakeholder work group to report to the legislature in 2012.
The Washington State Housing Finance Commission is a publicly accountable, self-supporting team, dedicated to increasing housing access and affordability and to expanding the availability of quality community services for the people of Washington.