

Building Community Support for Affordable Housing in Litchfield County:

A TOOLKIT



January 2024



Toolkit for Building Community Support

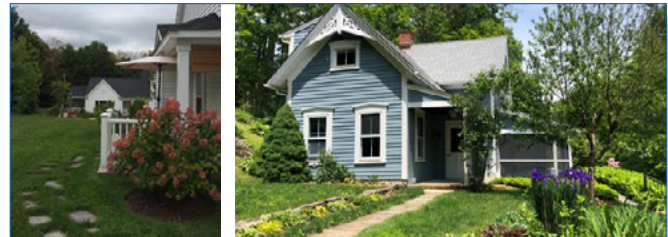
Towns and local housing organizations in Litchfield County often feel like they are fighting an uphill battle to create more housing that is affordable. This is due in part to public perceptions about what affordable housing looks like, who needs it, who pays for it, and how it contributes to a community.

Housing advocates and community leaders can work to change these perceptions and build community support for affordable housing by using this toolkit.

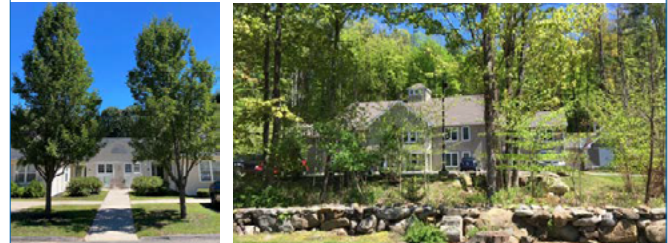
As you use these tools you may also find our Litchfield County Housing Needs Assessment Tool helpful as it provides data and analysis on housing stock characteristics, household incomes and affordability for all of the county's 26 towns.

Below you will find tips and examples for engaging your community through:

- ▶ Letters to the Editor
- ▶ Social media posts
- ▶ E-newsletters
- ▶ Speaking at town meetings and public hearings
- ▶ Having a table/tent at town events
- ▶ FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)
- ▶ Communicating with elected officials



This is what affordable housing looks like in Litchfield County



The Center for Housing Opportunity works to produce and preserve housing for people of all incomes, ages, and backgrounds in multiple regions of Connecticut. Each Center operates as a place-based strategic partnership that offers housing practice, policy, advocacy, and resources to address regional housing affordability.

This Toolkit is intended to help you bring to life the recommendations in our playbook, *Building Community Support for Affordable Housing in Litchfield County*.

AUDIENCE: WHO DO YOU WANT TO ENGAGE?

Make a list of who specifically you would like to engage and consider the strategies that are most likely to reach them. We know that changing perceptions takes time and consistent effort. Some of our local housing organizations have a communications subcommittee that creates an annual plan for which tools they will use and what messages they most want their audience to receive. You can think about who you might want to engage in these categories:

Influencers

Consider who in your community people listen to and trust when they speak. These influencers could help you build support for affordable housing, including people with lived experience, elected officials, school leaders, faith leaders, business leaders, and others. Ask them to attend a public meeting to express their support, or get a quote from them for your next e-newsletter, social media post, or letter to the editor.

Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers are the agencies, organizations and institutions which hold the keys to power in your community. Without their support, you may not be able to achieve your objectives. The most obvious examples are local elected officials, town staff, and planning, zoning, and wetlands commissioners.

Public at-Large

Members of the public may be for, against, or neutral towards your cause. Your goal is to engage them and bring them on your journey. You don't need to convert everyone to an advocate, but the tools you employ should help you to connect with as many people as possible in a dialogue about affordable housing.

MESSAGING: WHAT ARE WE SAYING?

To persuade key stakeholders and build public will, housing advocates need to use new and more effective messaging. As you utilize the tools in this toolkit, make sure you are clear about what message you want to get across. The LCCHO Playbook *Building Community Support for Affordable Housing in Litchfield County* contains detailed messaging ideas and talking points including:

- ▶ Focusing on solutions and local success stories to build residents' optimism about their ability to create housing opportunities
- ▶ Demonstrating that housing opportunity is foundational to the quality of life that residents enjoy, and a solution to many common challenges in our communities
- ▶ Offering an aspirational vision for a more equitable housing system where everyone has the opportunity to live in our communities and showing residents how they can help achieve that vision by supporting local affordable housing efforts
- ▶ Sharing stories of people who are directly impacted by the lack of housing options and highlighting how the housing system needs to change rather than the individual

News Media

You can reach some key stakeholders through the news media by submitting letters or opinions to papers, speaking to reporters and being quoted in stories. Pay attention to what's happening in your local newspaper and strategically insert housing into those conversations. (If you'd like to always be alerted when housing is in the news, you can set up a Google Alert for terms such as, "Connecticut + affordable housing" or "Litchfield County + affordable housing".) For example, submit letters linking housing to education during "back-to-school" time, or elevate the voice of a business owner who has noted they have to cut their hours because their employees cannot afford to live locally.

Letters to the Editor

A Letter to the Editor (LTE) is a brief communication to a newspaper's editors expressing an idea or opinion, which is then published. They're 100-400 words depending on the paper, and often respond to other articles or letters in the paper. They should be short and courteous. They should clearly state their purpose at the beginning, explain key points in the middle, and provide a summary with future recommendations at the end. [Here is some additional guidance.](#)

Submission Guidelines

- ▶ Lakeville Journal
- ▶ Republican-American
- ▶ CT Viewpoints in CT Mirror

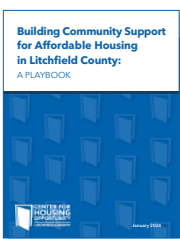
SAMPLE LETTER-TO-EDITOR

AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS WORKFORCE HOUSING

I love being able to meet a friend at Sweet Williams for coffee and then swing by Visionary Computers when my iPad stops working. Do you know what those two small businesses, and many others, have in common? They struggle to hire and retain workers because people cannot find an affordable place to live around here.

When a specific proposal from our local housing organization comes up, I often hear people ask, "where will people who live in this new affordable housing work?" They will work at our small businesses! Schools! Nursing homes! Local banks! Many of them already do work there but they are commuting unsustainable distances to get there.

The next time an affordable housing proposal comes before the Planning & Zoning Commission, let's show up at the meeting to support it!



MAKE CONNECTIONS

Lift up what residents love about Litchfield County. Demonstrate that housing opportunity is foundational to the quality of life that residents enjoy and a solution to many common challenges in our communities.

Social Media

Social media can help your message reach larger audiences, sometimes thousands of people at once. Each platform is a bit different. Facebook and LinkedIn offer more space for detailed posts, X (formerly Twitter) is ideal for short posts, and Instagram and TikTok are driven by visual content. The former are generally more popular among older generations, while the latter are more popular among younger generations. Generally, it's quick and easy to deploy messages on social media compared to other media. When you read an article about affordable housing, consider sharing it on social media with a constructive message that inspires others to lean in on the issue.

EXPAND YOUR REACH

If you write a letter to the editor or a newsletter article, consider sharing a brief version of it via social media to reach those who don't read the newspaper or get your newsletter.

When you post on social media platforms, you may receive negative reactions to your post. See the section of the Playbook on "navigating disruptive comments" when deciding when and how to respond. Remember that while you may not persuade the person who initially posted the negative comment, there are many other people reading the exchange who may be interested in how you respond and may be receptive to your message.

Tips & Best Practices

- ▶ Structure posts appropriately for each platform, considering length, photo or video requirements, and audience preferences
- ▶ Be concise and try to limit your post to just one idea or topic
- ▶ Write a post that someone else would want to share or engage with
- ▶ Include a visual component or a hyperlink, like an article, event, graphic or flyer
- ▶ Include a call-to-action (what you want your audience to do after seeing your post)
- ▶ Encourage feedback and discussion so more people engage with your post
- ▶ Research relevant hashtags and apply them to your post
- ▶ Tag other users in your post to increase the post's reach, especially local officials or organizations
- ▶ Cross post, which means sharing the same content across multiple social media platforms (platforms like Facebook, which owns Instagram, often have options to cross-post videos, articles, or updates)

Facebook

Facebook is the platform where you can most easily reach members of your own community, specifically through [Facebook Groups](#). Some Groups have thousands of members, so your posts there can reach many people at once even if you have just a few Facebook friends. Search your town on Facebook and join relevant Groups associated with it. Most towns in our region have at least one (sometimes more) town-specific Facebook group. Note there is also a large regional Facebook group called [Northwest Connecticut Chatter](#), which has over 15,000 members. A positive housing message posted in your town group or a regional group may be read by hundreds of people.

Facebook can also be a great way to promote your organization and the work you are doing. See these Facebook pages for good examples from a couple of our local housing organizations:

- ▶ [Kent Affordable Housing](#)
- ▶ [Salisbury Affordable Housing Commission](#)

Instagram & TikTok

Instagram and TikTok are driven by visual content because posts need to include a photo or video. People often use these platforms to spread information about social and political topics. For example, the topic of urbanism and affordable housing is popular on TikTok, [attracting hundreds of thousands of mostly young viewers](#). If you research relevant hashtags (i.e. #affordablehousing #housingpolicy #housingcrisis #ctpolitics) and apply them to your TikTok post, you can reach thousands of viewers. Consider, however, that most viewers may not necessarily be on your key stakeholder list.

X

X (formerly Twitter) is a good place to share news articles, events and websites related to your affordable housing journey. However, if you only have very few followers your message may only reach a few people. Still, many elected officials use the platform frequently, and if you “tag” them in your posts, they or their staff will see it. So you can engage with gatekeepers directly on this platform but it may be hard to reach the general public in your own community.

Facebook and LinkedIn Posts

Foster a sense of collective ownership of problems and solutions.



Show that positive change is taking place, but must be scaled up.



When you read a provocative newspaper article about affordable housing, consider sharing it on Facebook or LinkedIn with a short message that employs the Playbook recommendations.

E-Newsletters

E-Newsletters or emails can be an inexpensive and relatively easy way to reach interested residents in your town. You can get people to sign up or opt-in to your newsletter by putting an article in your town newsletter or on social media once or twice a year inviting them to sign up, or having a sign-up sheet at a town event. Mailchimp is a free email marketing software that has easy-to-use templates. For step-by-step instructions on how to set up a Mailchimp email or e-newsletter, see the “Communication Plan for Affordable Housing” created by Hannah Pouler. Ask LCCHO if you need a copy of this.

Consider putting out a brief newsletter monthly or quarterly to remind residents you are there and provide updates on what you are working on and what they can do to support the creation of more housing opportunities in town. The Salisbury Affordable Housing Commission created a content plan for a year’s worth of newsletters in advance, it is shared as an example below. [Here is an example of a Salisbury Affordable Housing Commission e-newsletter.](#)

EXAMPLE: PLANNING NEWSLETTER CONTENT

Salisbury Affordable Housing Commission

By Hannah Pouler, Communications Consultant

Thematic goals to be covered in newsletter:

- ▶ Reframe affordable housing as an investment
- ▶ Address misconceptions by highlighting the many forms of affordable housing and the timeline for creating affordable housing
- ▶ Link the affordable living movement with the community
- ▶ Highlight the work being done by housing groups in Salisbury

January: Why do we need more affordable housing?

- ▶ *Reframe*, by defining AH as an investment

February: FAQs launch - highlight that they're on our website, and include a few in newsletter

- ▶ *Reframe*, because the FAQs show that AH is an investment
- ▶ *Address*, because the FAQs contain info on many forms of AH
- ▶ *Link*, by emphasizing the FAQs are for the community's benefit
- ▶ *Highlight*, because the FAQs mention the many groups doing great AH work

March: Does an accessory apartment make sense for me?

- ▶ *Address*, by showing alternative AH option
- ▶ *Link*, by showing that accessory apartments bring benefits to the landlords as well

April: Interview with Peter Halle of Salisbury Housing Committee

- ▶ *Highlight* the SHC's work
- ▶ *Link*, by adding a human touch

May: Salisbury Housing Trust Interview

- ▶ *Highlight*, by highlighting SHT's work
- ▶ *Link*, by adding a human touch

June: Stories highlight - remind people about the stories page on the website, and include some excerpts in the newsletter

- ▶ *Reframe*, because these stories show how important AH is to our town businesses, schools, etc.
- ▶ *Link*, by presenting words directly from the mouths of valued community members.
- ▶ *Highlight*, by showing that this type of work is what SAHC members do (thanks Mary!)

July: Regional Zoom Out - put Salisbury in the broader context of a regional (nationwide, even) shortage in affordable housing

- ▶ *Reframe*, using “investment” language and showing this is a top priority of lawmakers
- ▶ *Link*, by showing that while this problem is persistent across CT towns, Salisbury is unique in the dedication of its community members to addressing the AH crisis

August: What is going on with the Pope property?

- ▶ *Link*, by showing the community we care about their questions surrounding Pope
- ▶ *Address*, by showing the many steps we must take before development can begin
- ▶ *Highlight*, by showing the Pope Land Design Committee’s hard work

September: Fall Fest Exhibit Highlight

- ▶ Promote the opening of the Exhibit at the Academy Building opening during Fall Fest Weekend

October: Interview with Anne Kremer (this is already on Salisbury Association site)

- ▶ *Highlight*, by highlighting SHC’s work
- ▶ *Link*, by adding a human touch (people might know Anne)

November: Sustainable practices make every home more affordable (Green homes content)

- putting this in November because people think about insulation and heating systems when it gets cold!

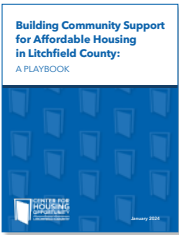
- ▶ *Link*, by showing that everyone can make their home more affordable, and align SAHC with sustainability activists in Salisbury

December: EOY newsletter



Newsletters, like the Salisbury Affordable Housing Commission's monthly newsletter, can provide updates on housing opportunities in your area.

Speaking at Town Meetings



PLAYBOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

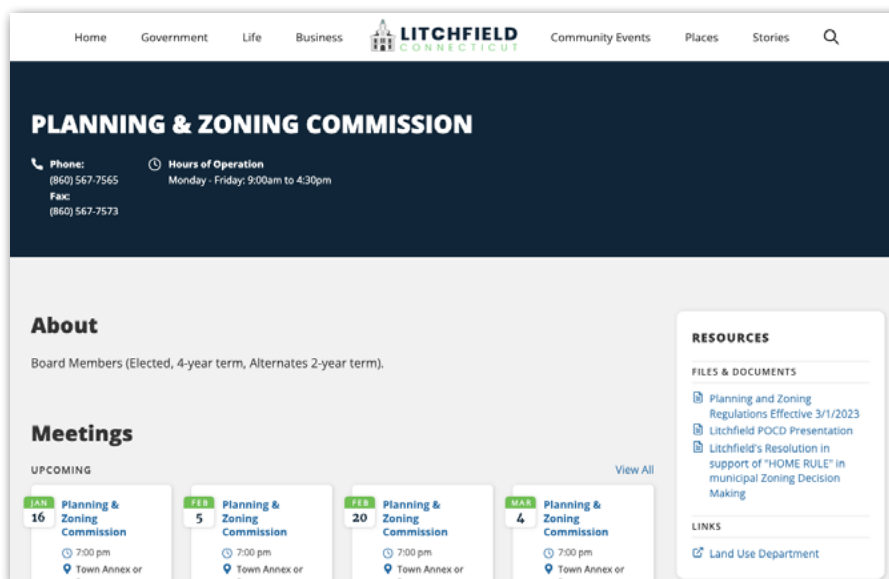
For tips on sharing your story, see page 12 of the Playbook.

You can often reach gatekeepers and the public at the same time during public forums, like Planning & Zoning Commission meetings, Board of Selectmen meetings and Town Meetings. Meetings about affordable housing are generally held by planning and zoning commissions, where the public can comment on specific developments, proposals, or regulation changes that would help create housing opportunities. Show up and testify by sharing your positive vision for the community and success stories as described in the Playbook. People who oppose housing often show up to these meetings. If the people who support housing don't show up, only one side of the story gets told.

Aside from showing up to speak yourself at town meetings, consider cultivating a list of "influencers" and others willing to share their stories at public meetings and inviting them to come with you. When you talk to someone who needs housing, a school principal, or local business owner, ask them if they'd be willing to share at a meeting and start your list with their name, email address, and phone number.

Tips and Best Practices

- ▶ Meeting schedules and agendas can usually be found on town websites
- ▶ Many meetings now have an option to attend virtually
- ▶ Arrive early to give yourself time to be calm and present
- ▶ Public comment or testimony is often limited to three minutes
- ▶ Prepare notes that will help you deliver your key points clearly, and within the time limit
- ▶ When your name is called, identify yourself, give your or your organization's address, and testify
- ▶ Make your case using just one to three key points
- ▶ Consider offering a [personal testimony](#) if you can
- ▶ You can also write your testimony and ask that the recording secretary receive a copy
- ▶ If you cannot attend, learn where, when, and how you can submit written comments



Meeting schedules and agendas can usually be found on town websites.

SAMPLE PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION MEETING TESTIMONY

I'm here to speak in support of the proposed redevelopment of the Batcheller School as affordable housing. This is the best use of that property, and I'll tell you why using an example from my own life.

My mother has lived in Winsted for 21 years. She and my father, who passed away three years ago, purchased a four-bedroom home here in the mid-2000s. Now that my siblings and I have moved out, she needs to downsize because the mortgage on our home is too expensive for her fixed income. I want to picture my mother aging gracefully in this beautiful community surrounded by her friends, where she can continue to contribute to civic life. It will keep her young!

This is possible. Winchester Housing Partners is proposing to redevelop the vacant school building to create the type of homes that will help my aging mother stay here. These will be mainly one- and two-bedroom apartments dedicated to staying affordable for people earning less than area median income.

In comments made earlier tonight, I heard concerns about property values going down in the neighborhood if affordable housing is built there. The value of my home is important to me, too. What I have learned is that communities with a diverse range of housing options are ultimately more desirable to homebuyers of all ages and to small businesses. Ensuring that we have housing options for our seniors and enough workers to maintain our local shops and restaurants is what will continue to make this community attractive to homebuyers. Plus, I hope you will agree that having people like my mom in your neighborhood would be a good thing!

I support this proposal wholeheartedly and hope you agree that it will help us achieve the important goals in our town's housing plan.

Direct Contact with Decision Makers

To ensure you reach gatekeepers, contact them directly. Find contact details for elected or appointed officials making housing decisions, whether this is your Board of Selectmen, Planning & Zoning officials, or State Representatives. Contact information for town officials can often be found on your town's website. The Town Clerk's office is often a good source of information, too. You can identify your state lawmakers through the [Find Your Legislators tool](#). You can ask to schedule a telephone or video conference, ask for a personal meeting, or send a letter to the legislator's office.

Before you call, outline your specific points regarding affordable housing, conveying the need for immediate action and potential solutions. Uplift stories of successful solutions in the region. Thank the official and urge him or her to take action. If you are writing a letter, follow the same advice and send your letter to the appropriate office. Communicate your concerns politely, providing concise details, and urging action to increase affordable housing in the region. Elevate the stories of those with lived experience such as the business owner or teacher.

Having a Table/Tent at Town Events

Does your town have a farmers market, summer music series, holiday event, or fall festival? Consider setting up a table at these events and have some materials from your local housing organization or town's local housing plan available. Materials could include:

- ▶ A postcard with the local housing organizations' mission and website address
- ▶ A sign up sheet for people interested in signing up for your e-newsletter, or who might be interested in joining your board/committee
- ▶ A handout with data on the town's affordable housing needs and current housing stock from your town's housing plan and/or a copy of your town's adopted housing plan
- ▶ One of your recent e-newsletters or letters to the editor
- ▶ Pictures of what affordable housing looks like in your town and in other towns in the area
- ▶ A laptop playing the "Housing Your Neighbors" or "An Investment in the Community" short films (or a slide-show of what affordable housing looks like)
- ▶ Magnet blocks so kids can build houses out of blocks while their parents talk to you

If you need help creating any of these materials, let LCCHO know! But the most important thing to have at the table are some representatives of your organization/committee/commission to answer peoples' questions and encourage them to get involved in some way.

Salisbury Housing Committee, Inc.

The Salisbury Housing Committee, Inc. (SHC) is a non-profit, all-volunteer organization that has been committed to building and managing affordable rental housing in Salisbury since the 1970s when local churches banded together to create Faith House.

We now own and manage 39 apartments at Faith House, Sarum Village I and II, and Lakeview Apartments.

With rising housing costs in town and long waiting lists at all our locations, SHC is working to develop additional housing units on four sites.

To learn more about what we do, how you could help, or to get an application for one of our developments, please visit our website:
www.salisburychousing.org

Example of a postcard that could be part of "tabling" materials

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

If you are an organization or town commission involved in affordable housing, consider adding (and regularly updating) a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) to your website. As you draft or edit your FAQ, remember the Playbook's recommendations about focusing on success stories, solutions, and local control, navigating disruptive comments, and highlighting what we have to gain when we create housing opportunities in our communities.

You can also consider creating a handout version of your FAQ sheet to make available at town meetings. Some organizations include a FAQ or two in each e-newsletter or in social media posts. The FAQ list can include both answers to the common questions that residents ask about affordable housing in general, and about your organization's projects in particular. See an example of a basic FAQ list below.

For some example FAQ see the following websites:

- ▶ Salisbury Affordable Housing Commission
- ▶ Partnership for Strong Communities
- ▶ NWCT Regional Housing Council

What does "affordable housing" mean?

The common definition of an affordable home is one where the resident spends no more than 30% of their income to pay the rent or mortgage. This then leaves them with sufficient resources to cover their other basic household expenses including food, healthcare, transportation, and other necessities. According to the CT State Statute, housing qualifies as affordable if it costs less than 30% of the income of a household earning 80% or less than the area median income (AMI). For our town, 80% AMI in 2023 was \$64,240 for a single person household and \$91,760 for a household of four people. Households with incomes at or below that level would qualify to live in affordable housing.

Who lives in affordable housing?

Many people who live and work in our town earn less than 80% AMI and qualify to live in affordable housing. In our town there are ___ households that earn under 80% AMI. Currently our town has ___ units of dedicated affordable housing. Residents of affordable housing work at local businesses like our schools, restaurants, grocery store, banks, and healthcare facilities. They range in age, including young adults, young families, and seniors on limited incomes. Residents who have applied, waited on the waiting list, and are then offered affordable housing have been more carefully screened for income, background, and credit checks than people who obtain market-rate houses or apartments in our town. A short film about who lives in affordable housing called "Housing Our Neighbors" can be found [HERE](#).

NEED TOWN SPECIFIC DATA?

As you use these tools you may also find our Litchfield County Housing Needs Assessment Tool helpful as it provides data and analysis on housing stock characteristics, household incomes and affordability for all of the county's 26 towns.

How is affordable housing funded?

Funding for the construction of affordable housing comes from dedicated State and Federal housing programs, corporate tax credits, and charitable donations. Generally, multi-family rental housing developments have a range of income levels and rents so that the rents can support the ongoing operations and maintenance costs of the units. Market rate housing is also subsidized by the U.S. tax structure through deductions for mortgage interest and real estate taxes.

What does affordable housing look like in our region?

Affordable housing in Litchfield County is attractive, energy efficient, and fits within the scale of the community. You can see photos of affordable housing [HERE](#). A short film (10 minutes) showing affordable housing in five of our small towns can be found by [CLICKING HERE](#).

Why is affordable housing good for my town and the state?

Regardless of if you already own a home or can comfortably afford rent, affordable housing options benefit all of us by making our economy and middle class stronger. When outsized housing costs eat up a family's budget, there's little wiggle room left for discretionary spending. When people have fewer extra dollars in their pockets to spend at local restaurants, shops and service providers, the entire economy suffers the loss in revenue, as does the state with the loss of sales tax. If we want to keep a strong middle class in Connecticut - and in turn build a thriving economy - we need housing options that work for people at all income levels.

Affordable housing is also workforce housing. Many teachers, tradespeople, healthcare workers, and other essential workers earn less than 80% AMI and need housing options they can afford. We hear often from small businesses and employers that they cannot find workers to fill open positions due to the high cost of housing in our area.

Having people who work in town able to live here can also help our volunteer fire and ambulance services find more volunteers. Some small towns have had to hire professional emergency responders due to a lack of volunteers, this is very expensive for a small town.

In closing

We hope you find the examples and guidance in this toolkit helpful. We have other examples we can share, too! If you need any help drafting flyers or utilizing any of the tools shown here, please don't hesitate to reach out to us here at LCCHO. If each town, organization, and advocate who reads this toolkit implements one or two of these tools each year over the coming years, it will be the groundswell we need to change the tone and the content of the conversation around affordable housing in our communities for the better and build a community of supporters. This will be essential to building housing units and creating the housing opportunities in our towns that we all critically need.



Litchfield County's Center for Housing Opportunity (LCCHO) facilitates a coordinated, regional response to address housing affordability in Litchfield County, aligning and delivering critical resources, data, and technical assistance to municipalities and non-profit housing organizations including: community engagement, education, and advocacy; capacity building support; housing plan implementation assistance; and collective impact approach.

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Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation

Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation strengthens communities through philanthropy and leadership. Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation responds to regional priority issues while addressing their root causes, expanding the role of philanthropy as a force for change.



Foundation for Community Health (FCH)

Serving the greater Harlem Valley of New York and the northern Litchfield Hills of Connecticut, FCH works to create the conditions required for health, well-being, and equity. To accomplish their mission, FCH makes grants, conducts research, provides technical assistance, and supports collaboration and advocacy.



The Housing Collective

The Housing Collective is a CT-based nonprofit agency that applies a Collective Impact framework to deliver solutions to the most pressing housing problems. Focused on ending homelessness and creating equitable housing opportunities for all, the Housing Collective provides the leadership and support that enables productive, regional collaboration across organizations and sectors and drives systems change.



Northwest CT Community Foundation

Northwest CT Community Foundation seeks to enrich the quality of life for residents of Northwest Connecticut by inspiring local philanthropy, convening stakeholders in community welfare, strengthening the regional nonprofits network and fostering collaborative funding partnerships.



Partnership for Strong Communities (PSC)

PSC is a statewide non-profit policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ending homelessness, expanding affordable housing, and building strong communities in Connecticut. PSC creates and promotes proven solutions for homelessness, supportive and affordable housing, and community development and connects key state and federal policymakers, local officials, corporate leaders and non-for-profit organizations.



Regional Plan Association (RPA)

RPA is an independent non-profit civic organization that develops and promotes ideas to improve the economic health, environmental resiliency, and quality of life of the New York metropolitan area. RPA conducts research on the environment, land use, and good governance, and advises cities, communities, and public agencies.

To learn more, visit cthousingopportunity.org or write to jocelyn@thehousingcollective.org

