



AP - Tribes struggle with decades of housing neglect2 messages

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Nice job, Chancy and Bob..

Tribes struggle with decades of housing neglect
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Editors Note An AP member exchange. With Photos.

By DAVID MURRAY
Great Falls Tribune

BROWNING, Mont. (AP) _ They call it Moccasin Flats, though the street sign marks it as 3rd Avenue Southwest. This neighborhood, just a few blocks away from Browning Elementary School, represents the worst of housing conditions on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, the Great Falls Tribune reported (<http://gftrib.com/1qlpysO>).

Empty, weed-filled lots separate the scattered mix of old trailer homes and wood frame houses. To keep the constant Rocky Mountain winds from peeling their roofs away, residents pile discarded tires atop their trailer homes. Boarded windows, missing shingles and torn siding offer poor protection from the frigid Montana winters. Stray dogs rummage through drifts of trash piled against scrap lumber fences.

It's a Third World neighborhood in America; one seldom seen by the thousands of vacationers who breeze through Browning each summer on their way to Glacier National Park. Yet it's repeated in hundreds of reservation communities across the U.S.

"It's not unusual to find a grandma who has 15 people in her home," said Chancy Kittson, director of the Blackfeet Housing Authority. "Oftentimes they're all living hand to mouth, out of a soup pot, while at the same time trying to pay for their electricity to keep their house heated."

A 2013 report sponsored by the National American Indian Housing Council found that 40 percent of on-reservation housing in the United States is considered substandard, compared with 6 percent of all U.S. housing outside Indian Country. Nearly one-third of reservation homes are overcrowded. Less than half are connected to public sewer systems and 16 percent lack indoor plumbing.

In recent years, the Blackfeet Housing Authority has doubled its efforts to improve conditions for the 2,700 people who rely on tribally owned housing. It has built or rehabilitated 155 homes in the last four years alone, but the housing shortage is so critical that even the run-down homes on Moccasin Flats are needed to provide some semblance of shelter for the many families hoping for a better future.

After more than two years of waiting, Blackfeet tribal member Nathan De Roche recently moved his family into a fully renovated home. Yet he recalled a recent visit to a friend whose whole extended family was crowded into a two-bedroom house.

"It was just packed, but they had no place else to go," De Roche said. "They were all family: a grandma, a dad, his two daughters and one son. All the kids were married, plus their kids. There must have been about six adults and six kids in there. There had to be different families all staying in one bedroom."

Under these types of crowded conditions, wear and tear causes the existing home to deteriorate rapidly. Doors and cupboards designed to be opened and closed perhaps a dozen times a day may see 1,000 uses in a single week. The major appliances, flooring, carpets, plumbing and fixtures all get worn down and worn out.

The overcrowding also aggravates human health concerns.

"The reality is that when you get multiple families living in the homes, you have more health issues," Kittson said.

Infectious disease tends to spread more rapidly, and the Blackfeet Housing Authority is often forced to confront persistent problems with bed bugs.

"It's gone through the schools and into the homes," Kittson said of the bed bug infestation. "You have so many people coming into homes, and then they go onto another house."

Lacking appropriate vapor barriers, many of these houses are now infected with black mold, presenting a serious health risk to the people living in them. Kittson recalled entering the home of an elderly man who had sealed his basement shut in an attempt to block the mold from penetrating into the rooms above.

This housing shortage has lingered on U.S. Indian reservations for nearly a century.

Federal legislation to improve living conditions for low-income families across the U.S. began near the end of the Great Depression. Following the end of the Second World War, the Truman administration expanded the 1937 Housing Act to include more money for "slum clearance" and urban renewal, but almost no money was allocated for reservation housing.

It wasn't until the mid-1960s that Congress earmarked specific monies to improve living conditions on U.S. Indian reservations. This led to a reservation housing boom that resulted in tens of thousands of completed housing units through the early 1980s. However, according to Kittson, many of the homes built during this era were poorly constructed and lacked any reference to traditional cultural values.

"The early construction we had was, in my opinion, subpar," Kittson said.

Homes built on the Blackfeet Reservation during the 1970s and 1980s frequently lacked adequate insulation. Most were built with only wooden foundations, hollow-fill doors and single-pane windows.

These houses were almost always built in "row-style" developments that lacked any reference to traditional Native American family groupings, and were exclusively centered in the reservation's largest communities.

Prior to the 1960s, a large percentage of the Blackfeet people lived in rural settings _ small, isolated family groupings widely dispersed across the landscape. The construction of so many new housing units in the towns and villages temporarily eased the housing shortage, but it also drew people away from long-established rural settlements, which tore at the fabric of Blackfeet society. The federal programs also failed to create any incentives or opportunities for Indians to purchase their own homes.

Today, roughly a quarter of all families living on the Blackfeet Reservation reside in a home owned by the tribe. Kittson and his staff are under constant pressure to maintain more than 1,300 housing units, many of which are in serious need of intensive reconstruction.

Now approaching 50 years in age, these civil rights-era homes still comprise a large segment of available public housing on the Blackfeet Reservation _ and a continuing dilemma.

"We have new money coming in that could be used for new development, but we're being forced to go back and correct subpar construction problems from the 1970s and 1980s," Kittson said. "We're confronted with homes that we have to demolish down to the studs. Essentially what we're left with is the foundation and the original framing. Then we replaced all the original plumbing, replaced the electrical, upgraded the insulation, replace the windows, drywall and siding."

"We don't have the luxury of abandoning these homes," Kittson added. "We can't build fast enough to serve all of our low-income families. We have to conserve the housing that we have."

A major obstacle to the construction of new housing is a lack of access to credit and the reluctance of private investors to commit to housing projects in Indian country.

Bob Gauthier is an enrolled member of Montana's Salish Tribe and is a board member on the Montana Board of Housing. He points to the difficulty many Native Americans face in obtaining home loans, combined with a lack of sophistication within many tribal court systems as major impediments to privately financed construction.

"You can have 10 banks lined up, but if people don't have lots ready to go, if the tribes don't have training programs in homebuyer education, if they don't support their courts when it comes to evictions and timely payments _ if you can't make it profitable for them to write loans, then all the banks in the world can't help," Gauthier said.

Tribal courts frequently find it politically unpopular to hold tenants responsible for past-due rental payments or property damage inflicted during their tenancy. However, if the tribe is unable to maintain its properties or keep them financially solvent, the housing problem simply perpetuates from one generation to the next.

"I'm a fighter and a believer in self-governance and self-determination," Gauthier said. "But I believe that means if you're a tribal leader, you have an obligation to look at your members and ask them to do what's right."

"When HUD went away, instead of running their programs responsibly, most tribes lowered the rental payments and relaxed the rules on who could live there _ which just compounded the problem," he added. "I've gone to reservations where they've got two employed families with a combined household income of \$100,000 living in a \$200-per-month, rent-controlled housing unit. How do you justify that?"

"As it is now, many tribal councils act as benevolent grandfathers. 'Oh, you're having a hard time _ well, you don't have to pay. You tore up your house, well, we know you're in crisis.' The tribe's trying to be nice, but really they're creating a bigger problem. Tribes need to be saying 'No. This is Blackfeet housing, this is Salish housing, this is Crow housing and we have a below market, but fair price that you have to pay. Everybody has to pay it or we can't help the people on the waiting list, which are your kids and your grandkids.'"

Gauthier was at the center of a prior effort to reform federal funding for Native American housing assistance. In 1991, he served as chairman of the National Commission on American Indian, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian Housing. In response to this commission's recommendations, the U.S. Congress passed the 1996 Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act.

NAHASDA moved federal funding for Native American housing out of U.S. Housing and Urban Development and repositioned it in the form of block grants transferred directly to the tribes. The goal was to give the tribes greater self-determination, allowing them to create housing programs better suited to local needs, and to get the tribes out from under the rigid bureaucracy of HUD-initiated programs.

"It said that all the monies HUD had been giving the tribes would now come to them in a block grant form with far fewer restrictions," Gauthier said. "The tribes could use the grants however they wanted, so long as the monies went to serve primarily low-income families. We could provide down-payment assistance, we could construct more modest houses. We could do a lot of things that weren't permitted under the original 1937 Housing Act."

"A lot of us thought this was going to be the beginning of solving our housing problem," he added.

But lacking a strong political voice in Washington, D.C., funding for Native American housing began to dry up. By the mid-2000s, glaring shortfalls in the program were becoming more apparent.

"HUD itself estimates that current NAHASDA funding will only meet 5 percent of the need for housing and that more than 230,000 housing units are still needed for Native American families," states a 2005 report from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. "The level of need far exceeds the amount of funding. As a result, tribal housing entities are only able to maintain the status quo, and cannot offer significant improvement to overall living conditions."

In February 2015, HUD announced \$651 million in funding for the Indian Housing Block Grant Program. That amounts to just 1.32 percent of the \$49.3 billion in gross discretionary funding allocated to the Housing and Urban Development Program as a whole.

"If we would have stayed in the 1937 Housing Act under HUD, we'd be getting about \$850 million a year because the act has a cost-of-living adjustment built into it," Gauthier said. "We didn't work language into (NAHASDA) that said whatever increases public housing gets, we get as well. It was a fatal assumption. Here we are 20 years later and a lot of people in appropriations, both in the House and the Senate, have no recollection that Indian housing used to be part of the 1937 Act. They see NAHASDA as a giveaway to Indians."

The Blackfeet Housing Authority is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the properties that it has, and new construction is relegated to alternative funding sources.

"Since 1997, federal funding has flat lined," Kittson said. "That same two-by-four that you were paying 50 cents for in 1996 costs you \$3.39 today. For us, everything comes down to budget."

Despite the setbacks and the obstacles, real progress is being made on the Blackfeet Reservation. Kittson has aggressively pursued a tax-credit funding program administered by the Internal Revenue Service. Instead of outright grants, these programs offer private investment groups a tax reduction incentive to invest in public housing projects.

"Their motivation is all financial," Kittson said of the tax-credit program. "The tribes are awarded a certain number of tax credits, which you can market to Main Street America. We sell these credits for around 78 cents on the dollar, but they offer a dollar-for-dollar tax liability offset for investors. Right now it's one of the only resources for new development that's out there."

Using this funding model, the Blackfeet Housing Authority recently completed a new \$5.1 million housing addition. In February 2016, Blackfeet Housing was awarded a \$1.1 million Indian Community Development Block Grant in addition to its annual operating grant. The extra money will be used to install metal roofs, windows, exterior doors and siding on several "mutual help homes," which are more than 30 years old.

It's an example of the greater sophistication the Blackfeet Tribe is employing in its approach to public housing: exploit the federal resources that are available to the fullest extent, but reach out and take the initiative to reduce the tribe's reliance on federal appropriations.

"We've survived for 10,000 years because we were self-sufficient," Gauthier said. "But we've learned how to be dependent, and that's got to be unlearned if we are to really have success. Let's use what resources we have, which are subsidized home ownership and low-interest loans, and get back to what the tribes are good at, which is taking care of themselves."

Information from: Great Falls Tribune, <http://www.greatfallstribune.com>

THANK YOU.