



HIBISCUS COMMONS SEEKS TO ADDRESS LOCAL HOUSING CRISIS FOR LOW-INCOME SENIORS

Hibiscus Commons is an intentional residential community designed for living and aging together in a way that is environmentally and economically sustainable. We are committed to addressing the acute housing crisis that is plaguing seniors and pioneering a model of cooperative living that can be replicated to build additional senior housing cooperatives in the future. Permanent affordability is central to Hibiscus Commons' mission. We have therefore teamed up with the Bay Area Community Land Trust, who will purchase the land upon which the housing cooperative sits, and hold it in trust to preserve affordable rents in perpetuity. This way, the project will not only benefit us, but generations of seniors to come.

Each Hibiscus Commons member has a history of activism, resourcefulness, and leadership in the Bay Area. Our stories are unique but co-founder Mary McDonald exemplifies why our group has come together. After separating from her husband, Mary realized that, *"...it is simply not sustainable for me to purchase in today's market and retire comfortably. When I started looking into housing options for women my age, I learned how many other women are in my situation or even worse because they don't have equity gained by home ownership, and may not have sufficient retirement savings. That's when I realized that cooperative senior housing would help not just me, but many other women needing an affordable housing solution."*

After selling her house and living in six temporary situations over three years, member Ina Clausen was priced out of the housing market. The stability and affordability of Hibiscus Commons is especially important to her. For member Alisa Foster, affordable cooperative housing is a necessity. As a Section 8 tenant she will have to vacate her 13-year rental within 30 days when her children leave home. Unless she finds a new single occupancy rental within 90 days, she will be cut from the Section 8 voucher program altogether. Homelessness, even with a Section 8 voucher is a huge threat.

The problem is not unique to our cooperative members. According to a 2018 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the poverty rate of seniors in California is amongst the highest in the nation.¹ The National Council on Aging has also shown that many of those seniors who are above the national poverty measure are still not able to cover their normal and emergency

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation, *How Many Seniors Are Living in Poverty? National and State Estimates Under the Official and Supplemental Poverty Measures in 2016*, March 2018.

expenses, and single seniors have a greater chance being economically insecure than their married counterparts, largely because they have no one with whom to share expenses.²

California's housing crisis has reached epic proportions in the San Francisco Bay Area, where affordable and low-cost housing is increasingly limited. Many renters in the Bay Area are considered "housing burdened", meaning that they spend well over 30% of their income on housing costs, leading to overall greater economic insecurity. This is especially the case for seniors on fixed incomes. With longer life spans, people are outliving their savings, and are typically spending more years coping with costly and inadequate health care.

The shortage of affordable housing has hit women and low-income communities of color the hardest, as well as seniors. Due to the impacts of gentrification, displacement, evictions of low-wage workers, and seniors, it is imperative to create affordable housing solutions. Wait lists for affordable senior housing are extremely long for the few units available, while lines to get applications for subsidized housing are even longer. It is common to be told, as member Harriet Wright was, that her gross income was too high for senior housing. As Harriet is aware, her income is also too low for current market rate housing.

Housing challenges are likely to become worse as millions of Baby Boomers retire. Pensions have dried up in recent decades. Many companies and public agencies have cut or eliminated retirement benefits. Therefore, seniors will rely on public services that are already strained and overburdened.

Barb Reusch, Hibiscus Commons Co-Founder, says that she started Hibiscus Commons to create housing that meets her need for privacy and community, allows for independence, provides proximity to the people and places that have made her life meaningful, and is affordable. She continued that "*with the help of the Bay Area Community Land Trust, our property will remain affordable throughout our lives and for posterity.*" As acknowledged by Urban Habitat and the East Bay Community Law Center, community land trusts and cooperatives offer a clear model for creating permanently affordable housing that is replicable and scalable across the Bay Area.³ As a project of the Bay Area Community Land Trust, Hibiscus Commons and its successor projects will limit increases in housing prices over time and provide housing stability for Bay Area seniors.

To learn more, get involved or help support Hibiscus Commons, visit: www.hibiscuscommons.org or email hibiscuscommons@gmail.com

² National Council on Aging, *Guide to Using the Elder Index*, April 2017.

³ Urban Habitat and East Bay Community Law Center, *Rooted in Home, Community-Based Alternatives to the Bay Area Housing Crisis*.