

## June 2019 | U.S. Poverty

### Organize to Address the Housing Crisis

Building on your community outreach to local allies in May (which you should most definitely continue), flex your formidable organizing skills this month to engage new people through letters that can be hand-delivered to congressional offices during lobby meetings in Washington, DC at the <u>RESULTS International Conference</u> (July 13-16) and/or at home during the July 4th or August recesses. To help, political scientist Professor Hahrie Han will speak on our <u>June 4 U.S. Poverty</u> <u>webinar</u> about her research on what makes organizations successful in getting people engaged in civic action. Below are some insights from her research on what works:

**Relationship.** We want to feel connected to others. Working with others in our advocacy work (writing letters together, supporting each other, and reflecting on what has been accomplished) keeps us motivated and sustained. Be it with just two people or a large group, working together makes a difference. RESULTS is a group-based model for this reason.

**Agency.** We want our unique voice to be heard. That means making our work our own. For writing letters, each person should write the letter that resonates with them, including their own story or why they care about the issue. The talking points below are a guide, not a requirement. And if letter-writing is not someone's strong suit, support them in taking an action that is (making a phone call, generating media, speaking in a meeting, organizing an event).

**Purpose.** We want to know that our work matters. The <u>success of RESULTS volunteers over the</u> <u>years</u> has helped reduce poverty and save lives. It's important that people hear that regularly. When they see their specific action fits into a larger movement, they rightfully feel included and valued. Remind people that hand-written letters make a difference – letters remind elected officials that their constituents care about poverty and will them hold accountable.

### Think Like an Organizer in Generating Letters

Letter-writing is old school, and there's no school like the old school. The time and effort put into writing a letter carries weight. It reminds members of Congress of your commitment, which gets their attention. Imagine what they'll think when you organize others to write letters too.

As you work to generate letters this month, put your organizing cap on to maximize your effort:

- At your June RESULTS meeting, set goals on how many written letters each person will bring to your July meeting (Not meeting in July? Track your progress in a shared document online)
- Brainstorm ideas of with whom and where you can ask people to write letters with you: with friends over coffee, at book club, in your faith community. We're around other people all the time; just go to them and ask. Keep a list of the people who say yes.
- Set a time for when and how you will pick up the letters (deadlines are good motivators).
- A week before the deadline, contact each person to offer encouragement and check in on their progress ("How's it going? Need help with anything"?).
- Pick up the letters, deliver them in meetings, and let your letter writers know what happened.



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#### Write Hand-written Letters for a Renters Tax Credit

This month, we turn our attention to longer-term and more impactful policies that will help Americans struggling to find housing. One of those policies is a **renters tax credit**. The U.S. tax code can be a powerful tool in alleviating poverty. However, there are few housing provisions in the tax code that benefit low-income Americans, particularly renters. The mortgage-interest deduction helps homeowners but most of the benefits go to wealthier, white households. A renters' credit would help level the playing field. While there are <u>several proposals in Congress</u>, they are similar: the credit would basically serve as a cap on the amount of rent and utilities a low-income household would pay (around 30 percent of their income). A federal tax credit would be provided for renters up to 100% of the area's Fair Market Rent value. By providing renters some relief from growing rental costs, more families could find safe, affordable places to live.

Many members of Congress are not aware of what a renters' credit is. Your goal is to educate them and help build support for bold tax policies that help address the housing crisis. That's how political will starts. There will be many more letters, media, calls, and meetings before a renters tax credit is law, but it starts with this letter. Thank you for doing this.

Use these talking points or our <u>online template</u> to write letters to your representative and both senators:

- 1. Start with "**Dear Sen./Rep.**\_\_\_\_\_". Tell your name and that you're a constituent and RESULTS volunteer who believes Congress needs to do more to help renters.
- 2. Tell them **America is in a housing crisis**. Millions of low-income working families struggle every day just to put a roof over their heads.
- 3. State that, according to Harvard researchers, **rents have risen by 61 percent since 1960 but renters' median earnings have gone up 5 percent**. Right now, only 37 affordable and available rental homes exist for every 100 extremely low-income renter households.
- 4. Explain that we can begin to address America's housing crisis by shifting tax resources to support a "Renters Tax Credit" for low- and moderate-income renters. A renters credit could limit rent for low-income families to 30 percent of their income and provide a tax credit for the balance above that up to local fair market value.
- 5. Urge your members of Congress to **tell congressional leaders** to support low-income working families and communities of color by enacting a renters tax credit in any new tax legislation.

#### **Note for E-mail Action Networks**

Copy this page of the June Action into an e-mail and add this message to the top:

Members of our local RESULTS group will be traveling to Washington in July/setting up meetings in August to meet with members of Congress about the importance of affordable housing. It would make a huge impact for us to also deliver hand-written letters from their constituents. Would you have time to write three letters for us to deliver in those meetings? All the information you need is below. I am happy to work with you to pick them up before we leave. And I will be sure to let you know what kind of impact your letters had after our meetings.