

THE NEED TO CONVINCING LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO ASSUME GREATER RESPONSIBILITY FOR ISSUES THAT WERE ONCE FEDERAL PRIORITIES

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

As 2019 winds down, at least one must priority comes to mind for activists seeking to make a difference in 2020. Groups such as the Homeless Coalition and Affordable Housing Advocates (AHA) need to convince the City of Cincinnati and Hamilton County to start funding critical services and programs that they previously relied on the federal government to pay for. Local government's failure to respond to decades of federal budget cuts have led to crises such as the 40,000 affordable housing unit shortage in Greater Cincinnati.



One problem exists in making the case for local action. The federal cutbacks didn't happen overnight. They have added up over a forty year period. This fact alone makes the story less dramatic, but what has evolved is every bit as devastating for those impacted by the cuts.

The loss of federal money for a range of diverse programs began in the Carter Administration in the late 1970s, and the cuts intensified in the Reagan years. In 1978, approximately twenty-five cents of every City of Cincinnati budget dollar can be traced to federal funding. Slowly but surely funding for everything from health services to employment programs began to dry up in this period, and this trend has continued until today.

Homelessness as a major urban problem did not emerge until the mid-1980s when the initial cuts in various housing programs and other services for low-income families and individuals took effect. When Applied Information released its study of homelessness in Greater Cincinnati in 1987, it reported that housing related issues ranked first as the cause of homelessness among families. It also acknowledged the local loss of federal dollars for federal housing programs as a factor.

By the time AIR researched its second homeless report in 1993, it included a section on the lack of affordable housing as a major reason for the further growth of homelessness in Cincinnati. "There are numerous factors involved in the housing crisis confronting the homeless," reads the report, "but most of these factors relate to the clients lack of income and the absence of affordable units." The report cited that federal funding for publicly assisted housing programs shrank from \$30-billion in 1981 to \$8-billion in 1987. It noted that in Cincinnati alone, less than 30-percent of the households that qualified for some form of federal housing assistance received it.

With some ups and downs over the years, federal cuts in affordable housing program and other safety net services have continued to this day. Although even activists have become somewhat numb due to the evolutionary nature of this trend, it is not surprising that poverty and homelessness have increased rather than lessened and that Cincinnati and Hamilton County have a 40,000 unit affordable housing deficit. These facts must be absorbed by local officials in

order to convince them that they must assume some responsibility for this crisis.

Cincinnati like most cities across the country have used a variety of policies such as tax abatements to lure business and to promote development. This approach, that also dates back to the 1980s, has succeeded to a large degree in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Dallas. Recent research shows that these cities have secured a lot of high paying businesses and upper-income residential development. The flip side of this picture, however, is that the highest degree of income inequality now exists in these cities. Low income residents have failed to benefit from this wealthy urban development. In fact, they are usually the losers who are displaced from gentrifying neighborhoods.

Over-the-Rhine and downtown Cincinnati are examples of this development trend. While gentrification has gone forward in housing and business in OTR, thousands of affordable housing units have disappeared from the area. Downtown is currently going through a burst of condo development, but it is all aimed at affluent clients. Very few apartments still exist for the working poor.

Thus, city governments such as Cincinnati's have long catered to this high end development, while they primarily denied any responsibility for their low-income citizenry. The parallel trend of the federal government's retreat from supporting and funding services for people in need of assistance have created the perfect storm for local income inequality and a hand to mouth existence for a large percentage of urban populations.

These facts must be part of their argument when activists state their case that Cincinnati and Hamilton County Governments assume greater responsibility for the current crises brought about by these trends. It will not be an easy struggle in this era where politicians fear that any tax increase will be opposed by voters. It may require a grassroots campaign that ends up as a tax levy on the ballot in order to wake up the general public and elected officials to the necessity of adequately responding to long neglected problems.