



# CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Break the cycle of poverty. Build community.



*People Acting Together in Howard (PATH) was created by churches in Howard County to address the concerns of low income people in the local area and to bring them together to create a community that could offset the balance of powerful corporate interest groups. Through house meetings and one to one conversations, low income members of these congregations have brought forth a list of issues that they face as a community. PATH is run by these low income people and has achieved victories in the area of public transportation and housing. Last year, in 2008, it was funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development with a grant for \$30, 000 to continue their campaign with low-income residents of mobile home parks.*

Poverty looks different everywhere you go. Across the country, people who are poor live in a variety of environments. These locations often determine the living conditions and lifestyles of those who live in poverty. Some of the issues that the poor face in the inner city may not be the same as the poor who live in the country. As a result, poverty may be apparent or hidden to the untrained eye. There are many ways to categorize poverty. One of the most frequent ways is by location. Sometimes our categorizations are often too narrow

for our own good. We think often about *urban* and *rural* poverty, but where do low-income people in *suburban* America live? To many people, suburban poverty is a myth.

If you were to drive down Waterloo Road in Howard County Maryland, through Columbia, and on to ElkrIDGE, it would be hard to miss the new housing developments and apartments interspersed with 40 year old homes and communities. What you might fail to notice is Deep Run Park. Shrouded by trees Deep Run Park sits not too far from these new developments, and far enough from the road that you might not notice that it is a mobile home park. This is where the poor in suburban Howard County live.



Howard County is one of the richest counties in Maryland. In fact, in 2006 the U.S. Census Bureau ranked it the third wealthiest county by median household income in the United States. Money Magazine rated the Ellicott City/Columbia area of Howard County 4th among "America's Best Places to Live." Despite these stunning figures and facts, poverty does exist Howard

County. Many of the low-income people who live in Howard County are residents of mobile home parks and rent land from park owners. There are 8 mobile home parks in Howard County with approximately 1,300 homes.

Renting land presents many risks and dangers to the residents of mobile home parks. There is a risk that the land could be sold out from under them. There is little the residents can do to prevent this process but they are often not given the opportunity or notice that the land is being sold, even they could afford to purchase it collectively as a community. Trailers are often damaged or unable to be relocated. Relocation is costly and residents of these parks do not generate enough income to have money to spare to pay for services to move their trailer. The average income for residents of mobile home parks in the United States is \$27,000 a year.

Poverty is not only defined by income but also by power. It is no secret to developers, owners of large plots of land, and local government officials that mobile home parks like Deep Run, are in danger of being sold, to entrepreneurs who would like to build more expensive housing units on them. However the residents are not often aware of this fact. Given their low income status, the welfare of people that live in mobile home parks is at the mercy of developers and those who own the land. These things classify them as poor more than their income. For most Americans, the risk of not being able to pay bills, or even possibly losing their source of shelter, by being forced to move, is

unthinkable. For those who live in mobile home parks this is a reality that they constantly struggle with as a community. One resident echoed the concerns of her community at a local hearing “I am not expendable, and neither are my neighbors”

In Howard County there is a lack of affordable housing for people who are low income. If these plots of land with mobile homes are sold the low income housing shortage would only worsen. PATH is trying to change the

balance of power to put it back in the hands of low income people by educating them and bringing them together. Without community, poverty can ruin a person’s life. By bringing people



together, organizations like PATH have created situations where entire communities take control of the situations and institutional dangers that would make them impoverished.

Run by low-income people themselves, like all projects funded by The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, PATH has helped secure a voice for residents so that they have a say in future of their park. Specifically, in 2007 and 2008, PATH has been working with local law makers to enact legislation that would give residents of mobile home parks the power to buy the land that they are renting if the owner decides to sell it. The type of legislation that is being advocated is called the ‘right of first refusal’. It grants residents the right to make an offer, according to certain terms, for the property that will be sold. In Howard County landowners with tenants on their land are only

required to give the tenants 45 days to put in a bid for their land. PATH wants to increase this to 60 days, and is asking lawmakers to put specific stipulations in the bill that would allow homeowner associations and community organizations to make an offer on the plot of land being sold. After all, the residents given their financial status, could not afford to make an offer on their own. Individually they are nearly powerless in the face of developers and landowners, but through PATH they have found an opportunity to come together to address their concerns as a community.

In 2007, PATH brought residents together to testify to the Howard County

Delegation of the Maryland Legislature in a hearing regarding this piece of legislation. Three members of PATH testified, and about 30 people attended the hearing to show their support. Wendel Thompson, a member of PATH and member of Bethany United Methodist Church, was the first to testify. He said that PATH recognized that park owners have the right to sell but in doing so they must provide an equal chance, among other business interests, for the residents to make an offer for the land. He also noted that most of these people cannot afford the affordable housing that Howard County is presently proposing.

Stacy Moran, a resident of Deep Run Mobile Home Park and member of Path, also spoke and posed the following questions to the Delegation, “why don’t we just live in another county? ...Do

you know who we are?...I have neighbors who work in various branches of the local and federal government including Howard County Public Schools, they are bus drivers, teachers assistants, they work in cafeterias, and in our neighborhoods... Many will not be able to travel to Howard County to work. Who will fill these jobs in Howard County?” According to the testimonies of Stacey and Wendel, even if Howard County could find people to fill these jobs they would not have a place to live. Should the government give the people who currently live and work in Howard County little to no chance to stay there?



In their most recent achievement PATH leaders participated in a

meeting in which the Howard County Delegation determined the bill was worthy to be submitted to the Maryland General Assembly. PATH’s leaders will continue to track the progress of this bill to ensure that it moves through the session with PATH’s recommendations attached. Currently they are beginning to organize around the mortgage crises to help low income people seek reprieve from a slumped economy.

PATH’s members and churches will continue to bring low-income people together to discuss and actively take part in their own future as a community. PATH has created this sense of community among people from various Christian denominations and religions. Fr Jerry Bowen, a prominent clergy leader in PATH and pastor of St Augustine Catholic Church, perhaps captured the nature of the organization

the best, “Joining with us in this interfaith organizing network are citizens, pastors, community and religious leaders, youth, elders, families, volunteers, all neighbors. We share common goals and energies of commitment to organize for power, action and justice. To arrive at this commitment, we have chosen to walk a path together, and to also create a path that leads to an overall better living experience as a community of neighbors.” PATH has already won some victories for the poor in Howard County, but on the issue of the mobile home parks it still has a long way to go. The residents do not own the land they currently live on but with this new bill they will at least have hope and the opportunity to buy that land so they are no longer at risk for losing their homes. In this, PATH has given them power through community and hope through action.

By CCHD Intern Mike Escol on 3/27/08