

# ‘NOT JUST A ROOF OVER THEIR HEADS’:

Housing means everything in our region



Jody Barton, a single mom with a teenage daughter, says the stars aligned when she signed the lease for her apartment. Having a place of her own that she could afford, with her own bedroom, a well-equipped kitchen and comfortable living areas in a community near her employment and her daughter's school was a dream come true. For Jody, like for so many of us, housing truly means everything.

Jody's landlord, who made this dream a reality, is Homestretch Nonprofit Housing Corporation, a Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO) founded in 1996 in Traverse City. It was established in response to the regional shortage of affordable housing with a clear mission: to develop affordable housing that meets diverse needs, including those of working families, retirees and veterans.

Today, Homestretch continues to fulfill this mission. Executive Director Jon Stimson says it's not just about bricks and mortar.

"...[I]t's about dignity, opportunity and stability. It's about people and building trust with our tenants, homeowners, and communities," he said. "I've seen what it means for someone to finally have a place to call home. It's not just a roof over their head. It's stability for their kids; it's the ability to save money; it's a fresh start."

The critical need for affordable housing in our 10-county lower northwest Michigan region is well-documented. According to the Housing Needs Assessment (HNA) commissioned by Housing North in 2023, the gap is 8,813 rental units projected through 2027. The largest gap, estimated to be 5,014 units, is for households earn-

ing up to 50% of Area Median Household Income (AMHI), roughly \$50,000 per year or less. Approximately 43% of these renters are considered "housing cost burdened" meaning they're paying more than 30% of their income toward housing, with 23% being severely cost burdened, paying more than 50% of their income.

Developing quality, workforce affordable housing is challenging and complicated, but Homestretch has successfully overcome many of these hurdles. Yarrow Brown, executive director of Housing North, Northwest Michigan's Rural Housing Partnership, says that "without nonprofit organizations like Homestretch, we would not have affordable housing in our region."

Not only is the need great from a quality-of-life perspective, but it also impacts our region's economic health. In the HNA, 74% of employers cited affordable housing as a major factor in their ability to attract and retain workers.

Josh Mills, Frankfort city manager and president of Housing North, describes affordable housing supply as "the critical infrastructure that drives future economic growth and quality."

So, what are the key ingredients that enable Homestretch to "move the needle"?

There is no single factor; it's a combination of elements, including design approach, construction and furnishings, a culture of partnerships and collaboration, public and private sources of capital, and the ability to develop at a scale that fits the needs and capacity of smaller, rural communities.

Homestretch applies innovative materi-

als and construction processes that save money without jeopardizing quality. For example, they use panelized construction and mass timber, which are cost-effective, more durable and energy-efficient. In rural areas that may not have natural gas service, they use electric heat pumps as the energy source, which are both efficient and environmentally friendly. Interior and exterior designs are attractive, with high-quality fixtures and appliances. Their multi-family properties are not only affordable to build and operate, says Stimson, but are "where people feel happy and healthy - where they want to be."

Another key to their success is garnering support from a broad range of partners to access funds and resources, including state and local governments, commercial lenders and community development financial institutions. Organizations like Housing North, Traverse Connect and the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation are also supportive.

But for every project, Homestretch's most important partner is the community. This means listening carefully to city, township or village leaders, respecting their voices, and developing plans that complement that community's vision, master plan and zoning requirements.

A great example is the recently completed Lake & Main development in Frankfort, now home to 12 families with incomes that average between 60% to 80% of AMI (\$43,562 to \$72,603). It is in the heart of the city and close to jobs, schools, healthcare, shops, beaches and the Betsie Valley Trail. City Man-

ager Mills, who worked closely with the Homestretch team on this project, describes them as "AWESOME partners" in a development that increases the affordable housing supply in Frankfort.

Location is another key ingredient. Warren Call, CEO of Traverse Connect, says that Homestretch's ability to develop housing in rural communities, even where there may be a lack of infrastructure and planning resources, benefits the regional economy.

I am excited to speak firsthand about another Homestretch project in rural Benzie County: Crystal Commons, in Weldon Township, which is less than a half-mile from Crystal Mountain. For more than 25 years, we have looked for a partner to develop safe, high-quality, affordable workforce housing that is close to jobs, schools, childcare, recreation and public transportation. Our donation of land to Homestretch for the Crystal Commons project speaks to our belief that this project will help build a stronger, healthier community for all.

Though shovels are not yet in the ground, we are grateful that Homestretch is continuing to do what it does best: take the long view, applying a formula that not only improves the quality of life for individual families but also that of entire communities ... because housing means everything.

*Chris MacInnes is president of Crystal Mountain. In 1985, she and her husband Jim moved from California to join this business and together have led its evolution. She is also active in state, local and industry organizations.*

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