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## CityViews: De Blasio Admin's Move On Land Trusts Reflects Good Idea, Great Organizing

By **Sam Miller and Arvernetta Henry** | July 21, 2017



*Picture the Homeless*

*A display that was part of the PTH campaign, in alliance with other groups, to get the city to experiment with community land trusts.*

In the fight against gentrification and displacement, we don't see too many big victories. But we had one this week, when the New York City department of Housing Preservation and Development announced that it will be giving \$1.65 million to expand permanently-affordable housing via community land trusts (CLTs).

A CLT is a nonprofit corporation that develops and stewards affordable housing, community gardens, civic buildings, commercial spaces and other community assets on behalf of a community. CLTs balance the needs of individuals to access land and maintain security of tenure with a community's need to maintain affordability, economic diversity and local access to essential services.

Members of Picture the Homeless have been fighting for community land trusts since 2004. We met with politicians and city agency officials, telling them this was a better way to address the housing crisis than an expensive shelter system that destabilizes communities & families. People rolled their eyes. Bureaucrats told us it was too complicated, and would never work in NYC.

We knew they were wrong. We knew that New York already had the Cooper Square Community Land Trust, and it had been housing formerly homeless folks and fending off displacement on the Lower East Side for decades. Our members got the statements from the city's Human Resources Administration, where they saw how the city was spending two to five thousand dollars a month for them to be in deplorable shelter conditions. We knew housing was less expensive, and that community land trusts would keep the housing permanently affordable and free from speculators.

So, we organized. We talked to people; we met with stakeholders; we held trainings; we built coalitions; we helped catalyze a conversation with lots of other groups working on issues of gentrification and homelessness and displacement

(<http://picturethehomeless.org/home/whatwedo/homeless-housing/community-land-trusts-the-homeless/>).

And now, the city is embracing and supporting this radical model that will allow community members to control their own neighborhoods, prevent speculation, incubate community-owned businesses, and keep housing permanently affordable to its poorest residents. (<http://citylimits.org/2017/07/19/city-dips-toe-into-funding-community-land-trusts/>) And two of the groups receiving resources (the New York City Community Land Initiative and the East Harlem/El Barrio Community Land Trust) were co-founded by Picture the Homeless.

“This will help curb spiraling rent increases that tenants face every year, because CLTs won't have rent increases every year like we see in NYC,” said PTH member Althea York. “The communities will have more control over land, and landlords won't profit from us anymore. Picture the Homeless has been doing this work for almost 10 years. We proved community land trusts can work, and now I hope HPD and others follow in our footsteps.”

Homeless people didn't give up hope. We continued to meet with the city, with HPD, with elected officials. Not only that, we traveled to other states to back up our findings. We learned how they were other able to keep their community land trust going, and help extremely low income people, move people out of the shelter. We saw how people were able to get back on their feet. They felt that they were someone.

We know this can work. We know shelters are not the answer. Shelters destroy families. They destroy people's health. They exacerbate health conditions. People get broken down in the shelter system. They feel like they're a piece of meat for someone else to profit off of.

Homeless people know that the roots of our city's housing crisis are embedded in speculation and greed. That's why Picture the Homeless has championed CLTs, which offer an antidote to speculation and a way of achieving the deeply affordable housing our city tells us is simply impossible to build. It's why we co-founded NYCCLI, and organized and staffed a CLT pilot in East Harlem, to turn vision into reality. Through that process we have brought CLTs as a opportunity and a tool to various city agencies, community boards, elected officials. It has been embraced because it makes sense, because it is proven to work (in NYC and around the world),

and because instinctively we all know it is a critical part of solving this city's housing crisis. **We know that the success of the model will demonstrate that homeless people are capable of leading the city out of the housing crisis.**

"It's about time HPD does something about using public land in a way that reduces homelessness," said PTH member Scott Hutchins. "Homelessness is all about economics, and if there is public land, the last people who should get it is people trying to make a profit. New York City Community Land Initiative has done the research, and we know the model can work because we studied other CLTs across the country. We think it's the best use of city funds to end the housing crisis."

No one can say a homeless person isn't important. People are valuable, and this proves it. Bad things might have happened to them, but they are willing to stand their ground and do the work. Homeless people are strong. They came together and now they're shaping city housing policy.

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*Sam Miller has been with Picture the Homeless for thirteen years, first as Housing Organizer and later as Lead Organizer, and he is now the Communications Director. He was a founding board member of the New York City Community Land Initiative. In his life outside of community organizing, he is an award-winning science fiction writer.*

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