

The Iowa Council on Homelessness (ICH) is the governor-appointed board tasked with addressing homelessness throughout the state of Iowa. Part of our charge is to support all Iowans experiencing homelessness in their movement from homelessness to economic stability and affordable permanent housing within a supportive community.

We write on behalf of the ICH to support those urging re-consideration of aspects of the zoning ordinance changes currently before the Des Moines City Council. We laud the attention to update the City's current zoning code and urge the City to continue to pursue planning in coordination with developers and other entities engaged in affordable housing. For example, we appreciate the focus on encouraging mixed-use neighborhoods and increasing development of both single and multi-family housing options along the city's transportation nodes.

As advocates for Iowans experiencing homelessness, we recognize the unique circumstances of each of Iowa's communities including Des Moines. However, affordable housing is a continuum. Any forces which restrict housing anywhere on the continuum negatively impacts affordability at other points on that continuum. Because those we serve occupy the lowest rung on that continuum, they invariably lose. We believe aspects of the proposed zoning policies will create such impact, resulting in more homelessness in Des Moines.

We join the Coalition for Affordable Housing in Des Moines in believing that the proposed zoning changes would reduce the availability of housing available to low-income households seeking to live in Des Moines and most assuredly to those homeless households we serve. Furthermore, we conclude that these changes if adopted would lead to an increase in homelessness in Des Moines. We therefore support the Coalition's recommendations to create a more equitable and inclusive system which ensures that residents can continue to access affordable housing as well as employment and services. These include not tying new housing to requirements of square footage, garage, basement, or design requirements; having the code not rely so heavily on discretionary exemptions; and allowing those renovating or rebuilding (especially due to disaster) to not fall under the restrictions of the new code.

As a state-level entity focused on addressing homelessness and recognizing that the solution to homelessness is affordable housing, we invite the Des Moines City Council to meet with us and suggest ways in which the Iowa Council on Homelessness might be of assistance with creative changes to state housing-related policies. We understand that City Council's priority is to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of all Des Moines residents. If we can be of assistance in supporting this goal for Des Moinesians and all Iowans, we are more than happy to do so.

Sincerely,

Karin Ford
Chair, Iowa Council on Homelessness