

sent out as fast as it takes to type.  
 But there's another reason. It was once

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COMMENTARY

An investment for Bemidji and beyond

Every day, I see what brings people through the doors of Bemidji's Housing and Redevelopment Authority. Sometimes it's a family about to be evicted from their apartment after a parent has lost a job or has become ill and unable to work. Sometimes an older adult whose bank balance has shrunk to nothing and cannot make ends meet. Sometimes working people come to us when the size of their paychecks forces them to choose between paying the rent and buying food for the kids.

With the state legislature deciding where to invest its resources for the next two years, our experience in Bemidji tells us that housing should be funded generously. Support for housing helps families, children and vulnerable people meet their basic need for shelter. But it also reduces the burden on other parts of the budget.

The scope of the problem speaks for itself.

There are over 2,100 renter households in Beltrami County who earn less than \$20,000 each year. Of these, 80 percent are living in housing that is unaffordable at their income level.

In Beltrami County, a minimum wage worker needs to work 69 hours per week every week of the year to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment.

On a single night in October of 2012, almost 700 homeless people were identi-

fied in northwest Minnesota, up almost 60 percent compared to 2009. Half were children or youth.

Investing in rehab of existing housing, such as the public housing operated by the HRA of Bemidji, also creates solid construction jobs.

The *Homes for All* coalition supported by 80 housing and homelessness organizations statewide is taking a thoughtful approach to housing this legislative session. *Homes for All* has proposed:

- ▶ An increase of \$25 million in funding for effective housing and homelessness programs that would invest in new or rehabilitated housing where the need is greatest

- ▶ An increase of \$25 million in funding for services to help homeless people stay housed and prevent others from becoming homeless in the first place

- ▶ \$50 million in bonding that would help accomplish many of these same housing goals, while putting people to work

Certainly, our state's lawmakers have a lot of hard choices to make in balancing the state's needs and priorities. Yet funding for housing would be among the smartest investments we could make.

**Laura J. Straw**  
 Executive Director  
 Housing & Redevelopment Authority of Bemidji

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