

Candidate Questionnaire on Housing Issues

2022



Bonnie Westlin

City/Town: Plymouth

Legislative District: SD42

Party: DFL

Candidate responses in italics.

1. In July 2021, a [national poll](#) found that 68% of the public believes that elected officials are not paying enough attention to the rising cost of housing and ensuring everyone can afford a place to live. **What do you believe is the role of government in ensuring everyone has a place to call home?**

Every Minnesotan, white, Black or brown, should have the right to safe and affordable housing. The role of government should include ensuring every Minnesotan is housing secure. Minnesota must be a leader on this issue. We should pursue public-private partnerships to develop affordable housing, in addition to more public housing around the state. I also support increasing access to public transit, and developing housing units along robust transit corridors, which is necessary for individuals to maintain employment and housing. Ultimately, I believe that the government needs to take on a significantly more active role in ensuring everyone has access to affordable and safe housing, as well as the wrap-around services and supports some individuals may need to maintain secure housing.

2. Nearly all counties in Minnesota (92%) are not able to provide sufficient shelter or temporary housing to those who are homeless. **What will you do to end homelessness?**

No one should be forced to live on our streets because of lack of means and we should be doing everything we can to prevent homelessness to begin with. Lack of access to emergency and temporary housing is at crisis levels. I support allocating state funding towards immediate shelter and temporary housing needs around our state. I support dramatically expanding the amount of shelter beds available in the Twin Cities. In order to achieve this, we need innovation. We need to support non-profit organizations that have developed proven models for reducing homelessness. We also need to leverage the funding and development expertise that the private sector can provide while ensuring that housing construction includes affordable options. Only through sharing knowledge and collaboration can we attempt to end homelessness.

3. Emergency rental assistance keeps people stably housed, as we saw with federal pandemic-related funding. Historically, nonpayment of rent is the most common reason landlords evict their tenants. During times of financial crisis, families without access to financial resources may be displaced, evicted, or even become homeless. **What will you do to prevent evictions?**

Pandemic-era housing stability programs including rent subsidies for low-income families should be extended in order to protect Minnesotans from eviction due to inability to pay rent. By intervening urgently both before and immediately after eviction and by providing counseling and housing placement services, and having an adequate temporary housing supply to redirect folks to, we reduce the number of renters who are evicted or displaced.

4. Minnesota's housing crisis disproportionately harms families of color, especially Black and Indigenous households. Minnesota is one of the worst states in the nation for racial disparities in homeownership. Additionally, 58 percent of Black renters are paying more than they can afford on housing costs. **What meaningful steps will you take to eliminate racial disparities in housing?**

I support using state funds to incentivise and scale the work that non-profit organizations are doing right now to provide rental assistance to Black, Indigenous and other renters of color. In particular, and using an equity lens, state funds should be directed to organizations with a proven track record of working on housing issues in communities of color: Black, Indigenous, Latino, Somali and other communities that require funds to support rent affordability and first-time home purchasing. Minnesota needs to fund housing innovation and ingenuity that serves communities of color.

5. There are approximately 170,000 renter households in the state that earn less than \$31,200 per year. But rental assistance is only available to one out of every four income-qualifying households. Even though more than 100,000 lowest income households need homes, the state only supports the production of 100 homes each year for these families. **What will you do to support the housing needs of those at the lowest income level in Minnesota?**

There are many families that earn more than poverty level income, but not enough to provide their family with adequate shelter. The 170,000 renter households in Minnesota earning below \$31,200/yr need additional financial support from the state. At the current pace of state-funded home constructions per year for our lowest income households, it would take us 1,000 years to meet current housing needs. This pace is unacceptably slow. We need to reconceptualize the government's entire role in the housing sector. Minnesota needs to work with developers who bid low on public projects and who construct with the lowest possible development costs in order to achieve truly below-market rate rents and mortgages on the final cost to the consumer.

6. Energy efficiency improvements in multifamily buildings and weatherizing single family homes improve indoor air quality, eliminate drafts, and protect residents from extreme cold and heat—delivering health benefits and lower health care costs. **What strategies do you support to improve housing conditions and reduce utility costs?**

As our buildings age, we need to ensure they remain both habitable and resilient for a climate-friendly future. Reducing utility costs is an issue that is heavily connected to climate change. We need to establish climate-resilient utility infrastructure to ensure our energy future as we begin the transition away from fossil fuels. We need to increase the amount of solar and wind farms and other methods that generate renewable energy such as hydropower, geothermal power and biomass. We must meet our state's climate goal of halving our greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and transitioning to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. I will support legislation that helps us achieve these ambitious goals.

7. Minnesota's home values are increasing rapidly, constraining low- and middle-income families from achieving affordable homeownership, including more than 64,000 households of color. **What steps will you take to increase opportunities for renters to purchase homes, condos, or cooperative ownership models?**

The median value of a Twin Cities home is double what it was in 2017. That is proof that the real-estate market is too hot and not sustainable for (would-be) buyers who are priced out by higher prices and interest rate increases. The state should incentivize first-time purchases made by low income Minnesotans and Minnesotans of color through cash-towards-down-payment programs or property tax rebates. There are numerous models that work outside of Minnesota that we need to import to our state.

8. Including the recommendations of the community when developing policies and programs is a best practice for effective and lasting solutions. **How will you include those most impacted by housing needs in developing and implementing housing solutions?**

Soliciting community input for housing solutions is critical to the long-term, lasting success of these programs. We need to ensure that solutions for housing are centering the voices of those who need housing the most: low-income Minnesotans, and often Minnesotans of color. Those voices should have primary seats at the table. As new state policies and programs that address housing issues are developed and proposed, the voices of marginalized communities need to be heard and prioritized in community feedback mechanisms. We need a housing market that works for everyone, not just the wealthy.

