

## Writers on the Range: Creative builders get rural housing done

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Here's a statistic to be unhappy about: Colorado and Utah host the fifth and sixth most expensive housing markets in the country, according to Bankrate.com.

But here's the good news: two rural housing champions in those states have found creative ways to build affordable housing.

Moab, Utah, sited along the Colorado River, draws at least 5 million tourists annually for mountain biking, rafting, four-wheeling, and visiting two nearby national parks. But the town's real estate has long been pricey, and back in 2004, a Moab loan officer named Emily Niehaus realized that the only affordable housing in her hometown was mostly older trailer homes.

She also knew that national loan programs such as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac excluded loans for trailers built before 1976.

Harnessing both frustration and ingenuity, she founded a nonprofit, Community Rebuilds, to tap into USDA's Section 502 Direct Loan Program. It pegs monthly payments for housing to residents' income. To cut costs she looked for "dirt cheap materials," coming up with strawbale construction that mixes dirt and straw.

Today, 72 new houses — and counting — have gone up. Niehaus, who also served as mayor of Moab, said that she liked getting things done fast, learning along the way.

In the beginning, Niehaus had little operating money and no workforce. Then she met 20-something Noah Aptekar, who was "couch-surfing" his way home from a cross-country bike trip.

Niehaus said she made him a deal: "For every student you're able to recruit to build strawbale houses, I'll give you a hundred dollars. I need eight to start." Aptekar, who now works for SpaceX, delivered six women and two men.

Niehaus quickly points out that Moab is known as "a cool place" to hang out. Offering young people a place to sleep, a stipend for food, and an education in handmade housing won't work everywhere in the West, but in Moab it was magic.

When Community Rebuilds sells a home to qualified residents, the cost is about \$220,000, though the houses are worth \$500,000 on the open market. To block flipping, the \$280,000 in equity is transferred to the owners over a period of 20 years.

Niehaus said that USDA's Direct Loan Program for rural areas restricts buyers to those who make 80% of an area's median income. Typically, that's \$37,000 for a household of two.

There's a long waiting list for houses, but Niehaus, who has been succeeded as boss by Rikki Epperson, said applicants usually spend those years cleaning up their credit to qualify for a mortgage. Niehaus added that financial counseling is a key component to spurring home ownership.

Over in the western Colorado town of Montrose, Carlton Mason has also developed a novel way to build houses for the rural unhoused. The ex-builder constructs communities for young adults aging out of foster care, and recently he included senior citizens needing housing as well.

He got into housing because of his job as director of CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates, for the 7th Judicial District in western Colorado, covering six counties.

Mason said he found that 18-year-olds newly on their own needed lots of help. But what they especially needed was somewhere to live. His first project, called 1st Place on 2nd Street, was completed in 2018 by tapping into state, federal and foundation grants, providing housing in Montrose for up to 12 residents.

The suicide of one of those residents shook Mason. In response, he beefed up residential support: "Residents needed to build relationships with trusted adults who could also give advice about saving money and staying employed or in school. They needed to know adults actually cared about them."

“We’ve thrown money at housing for decades,” he added, “and often we end up with blighted communities. Providing adequate and safe housing is just the first step in helping the most disadvantaged people.”

Both Mason and Niehaus agree that their method of harnessing a variety of funding isn’t for everyone.

“I’ve been asked to advise other communities on how to build houses for middle-income residents,” Niehaus said. “But I only know how to build houses for low-income residents using volunteer labor and USDA funding.”

As for Mason, who’s on a roll to build more needed housing on non-agricultural land, he said, “I’ve had to learn as I went, but as support got bigger, I saw we can get things done I never thought possible.”

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