



# Building Affordable Communities With DEI in Mind

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In light of Black History Month, The Habitat Co.'s Charlton Hamer discusses how affordable housing intersects with DEI initiatives.

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In cities like Chicago, the disparity between different demographics' access to housing has been an issue for decades. Both developers and local authorities have intensified their efforts to bridge the gap, and provide homes and shelter for the metro's most vulnerable populations.

The Habitat Co. is one of the most active affordable housing developers, managers and investors in the Chicago area and in other underserved areas. The company's affordable housing portfolio comprises more than 9,000 units.

Charlton Hamer is the senior vice president of Habitat Co.'s affordable group and is responsible for all the company's affordable housing developments and initiatives. In the interview below, Hamer told *Multi-Housing News* what it means to work in affordable housing development in Chicago, and how his team's efforts are contributing to combating inequality and lack of access to shelter.



(<https://www.multihousingnews.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2023/02/Charlton-Hamer-e1677232147561.jpg>)

Charlton Hamer, Senior Vice President, Habitat Affordable Group. Image courtesy of The Habitat Co.

How did you choose to work in this field, and what motivates you after so many years in the multifamily industry?

Hamer: The sincere need to make a meaningful impact (<https://www.multihousingnews.com/mission-success-why-work-in-affordable-housing/>) on the lives of people is what beckoned me to the multifamily industry. My motivation, or better described as passion, is being able to create a community in which people can reside in a decent and safe environment.

In addition, I believe it is imperative that property operations acknowledge that our work is to provide a service that enhances the quality of life for residents within a community. Housing/shelter is one of the necessities of life. I take pride in creating and maintaining housing opportunities for people who have experienced issues with affordability and decency.

My formal education is in urban planning and policy. Early in my career, I worked as a municipal planner and for quasi-governmental bodies that were tasked with creating infrastructure to spur economic development. I always felt this work was from afar and not directly involved in making a meaningful impact. Therefore, I changed my career path from being a facilitator to being directly involved in business that develops and maintains real property.

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READ ALSO: What 2023 Holds for Affordable Housing (<https://www.multihousingnews.com/what-2023-holds-for-affordable-housing/>)

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In your view, has the multifamily industry made meaningful progress toward diversity and inclusion? How can these aspects be better addressed?

Hamer: In consideration of the corporate world there has been slow progress. 'Meaningful' is a term I feel is a bit premature at this time, however, I am hopeful we will achieve meaningful inclusion based on respect in the

near future. More so, I am very pleased to see the growth of diversity among entrepreneurs—those simply not waiting for inclusion at the corporate level but taking the risk in leveraging their education and experience to acquire capital to finance their own vision.

There is a tremendous opportunity for entrepreneurs of color at this moment. I believe the most impactful way of increasing inclusion is providing greater access to capital (<https://www.multihousingnews.com/innovative-solutions-for-affordable-housing-finance/>) for entrepreneurs of color to finance their vision. These entrepreneurs, in turn, will become multipliers extending their vision to business for many others.

As head of the Habitat Affordable Group, how does your leadership position contribute to improving diversity, equity and inclusion within the company?



(<https://www.multihousingnews.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2023/02/43-Green-Phase-II-Habitat-Co.png>)

Rendering of 43 Green's Phase II. Image courtesy of The Habitat Co.

Hamer: I see my contribution not simply within the company but to the broader industry, as well. It has been ingrained in me by my parents to respect all people regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, nationality, gender identity, phenotype etc. I've been taught to respect humanity, period. In consideration of my personal experience, I am mindful and sensitive to making decisions with integrity in serving our team members and clients for a healthy and growing business.

Understanding and representing the world at large is simply good business. I see my leadership as being able to strengthen our diverse team by ensuring that all parties' needs are being met without compromising one's wellbeing or eroding team trust. This is a very delicate balance.

In addition to our internal efforts, I strategically seek business partners that not only enhance our economic position ([https://www.multihousingnews.com/an-insiders-](https://www.multihousingnews.com/an-insiders-perspective-on-financing-affordable-development-in-nyc/)

[perspective-on-financing-affordable-development-in-nyc/](https://www.multihousingnews.com/an-insiders-perspective-on-financing-affordable-development-in-nyc/)) but offer capacity building for women and minority-owned business enterprises. These partnerships are mutually beneficial in which there is a fair exchange of value between both parties that are mutually invested in the success of the venture.

What are some challenges you regularly face as an affordable housing developer, and how do you overcome them?

Hamer: There are thousands of challenges, but one of the most significant is funding. There is a limited amount of capital to finance an increasing affordability gap (<https://www.multihousingnews.com/affordable-housing-2022-new-strategies-to-create-opportunity/>) throughout the country. This lack of funding spans across the spectrum—development, preservation and operation of affordable housing. Our team is extremely adept in turning over every stone, dissecting public policy and finding sources to fund our affordable endeavors. Our company is also diligently working on a strategy to provide affordable housing for the missing middle, those at 60 to 120 percent of the average median income.

Tell us about the latest projects you worked on in Chicago, such as 43 Green.

Hamer: We are in the middle of two of the largest mixed-use, mixed-income Chicago-based projects in Habitat's 50+ year history: 43 Green in Bronzeville and Ogden Commons in North Lawndale.

43 Green is the first equitable transit-oriented development on Chicago's South Side. Centered around the CTA's 43 Street Green Line station, the \$100 million mixed-income, mixed-use project, which is being

developed in three phases, will bring approximately 300 new apartments to the neighborhood upon completion.

Located on a long-vacant, city-owned lot on the northeast corner of East 43rd Street and Calumet Avenue, the Phase 1 building is the largest of 43 Green's three buildings and will welcome its first residents this fall. The 10-story development is composed of 99 residential units in a mix of studio, one- and two-bedroom floorplans, 5,500 square feet of retail space and off-street parking. Half of the apartments are reserved for households earning up to 60 percent of the AMI, with the remainder leased at market rate. I feel fortunate to be working alongside long-time friend Phil Beckham, himself a resident of the Bronzeville neighborhood, and his company P3 Markets as co-developers of 43 Green.



(<https://www.multihousingnews.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2023/02/43-Green-Phase-I-Habitat-Co.jpg> )

43 Green Phase I. Image courtesy of The Habitat Co.

Ogden Commons is a 10-acre, 120,000-square-foot, \$200 million development that is the city's largest mixed-use opportunity zone project, and upon completion will bring commercial and retail space and approximately 350 mixed-income housing units to the area. The first phase, a three-story commercial building, was completed in 2021 and is now open, with Wintrust Bank and Momentum Coffee located at street level and Sinai Health System's One Lawndale Express Care Clinic occupying the building's second and third floors, bringing critical outpatient services to Chicago's historically underserved West Side.

Phase two of the project, which is a 92-unit multifamily building that is 90 percent affordable, will break ground in the coming months. Ogden Commons is a partnership between The Habitat Co., Sinai Chicago, Cinespace Chicago Film Studios and the Chicago Housing Authority.



(<https://www.multihousingnews.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2023/02/Ogden-Commons-Rendering-Habitat-Co-e1677232858540.jpg>)

Rendering of Ogden Commons. Image courtesy of The Habitat Co.

How acute is the need for affordable housing in Chicago? What do you think are some achievable solutions to boost supply?

Hamer: Very acute. A few years ago, the DePaul Institute for Housing Studies identified a 120,000-unit shortfall of affordable housing units. Essentially, this means there is a growing number of people in Chicago that are paying more than 30 percent of their adjusted gross monthly income on housing. Over 30 percent has been deemed as unaffordable.

A call for more funding to create and preserve low- and moderate-income housing is elementary. However, creating more and enhancing incentives offers more immediate solutions. Some of these include disposing of public-owned property in a manner which can provide equity for the development; broadening the reduction of real estate property tax assessments; broadening the reduction of ancillary taxes for the development of affordable housing, including sales taxes, and focusing

solely on the creation of affordable housing and foregoing other added initiatives that drive up the pricing for affordable housing.

Is Chicago headed in the right direction to address and challenge historic inequities and segregation issues?

Hamer: It should be fully acknowledged that housing segregation in the city of Chicago and the broader region has been an acute concern for over a century. Combating these inequities and segregation is more arduous here in Chicago than it is in many communities around the country. Organizations such as the Urban Institute have ranked Chicago as one of the most racially and economically segregated cities in the country.

Over the past 10 years, since I've returned to the Chicago area, there has been more of a concerted effort to acknowledge these inequities and provide serious solutions to mitigate the effects. The city has earmarked funding to increase the numbers of decent, safe, and affordable housing across many areas of Chicago, which I believe is a sign of recent progress.

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