

# Group gathers to address low-income housing

By Megan Nichols  
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03-18-2008

Representatives from 19 Calhoun County organizations came together Wednesday afternoon to address low-income housing issues in the area.

The meeting at the Anniston meeting center was led by members of the Low Income Housing Coalition of Alabama, a group created less than a year ago to increase housing for Alabamians with financial need.

LIHCA officials were in Anniston to recruit new members for the group and to learn about Calhoun County's housing needs.

Ashley Kerr, project manager for LIHCA, said people in the state are not aware of its poverty issue.

"We are trying to educate people about the issues and get them to come together to work for a solution," Kerr said.

Toward the end of the meeting, audience members were asked to write down housing successes and dreams as well as needs and barriers. The answers were posted on the wall for discussion.

Successes mentioned included a renovated house completed by the West Anniston Community Development Corp. for a low-income family and a strong Habitat for Humanity presence in the area.

Housing needs cited by audience members include first-time buyer assistance, funding for rehabilitating older homes and incentives to builders for the creation of low-income housing.

Anniston Mayor Chip Howell said the city is committed to improving the housing situation.

"We are being very aggressive in this," he said. "One thing we need to do better on is educating our populace on what to expect when buying a house so that they don't end up in a mess."

One of LIHCA's main goals is to establish a housing trust fund in the state, Kerr said. She said Alabama is one of the few states without a trust fund, which would allow organizations to draw from state money to subsidize their housing budgets.

"This is essential, but it could take time," she said. "We're talking marathon time, like 10 years. We can do it, we just have to get people on board."

Sherri Sumners, president of the Calhoun County Chamber of Commerce, said that's why it's important for people to join LIHCA.

"When you go to the Legislature you have to go with dollars or votes," she said. "We're never going to have the dollars, so we need to show community support."

Kerr said LIHCA has around 60 members right now, but wants to grow.

"I want millions," she said. "Seriously, I want every single person in the state to learn about this issue."

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