

December 9, 2024

Dear Commissioners Adkins, Eliason, and Chmiel:

The Athens County Housing Security Co-Create Group formed in December 2023 as a coalition of community members and organizations committed to designing and implementing solutions to housing insecurity in Athens County. Through shared resources, fundraising, and collaborative problem-solving, we are working towards long-term, sustainable solutions while addressing immediate gaps and opportunities. You can read more about the group and get involved here: <https://athensfoundation.org/co-create/housing/>.

We're writing to confirm **our support for The Gathering Place's West Union Conestoga Hut Project**, in addition to other simultaneous initiatives like refurbishing the Columbus Road Sunset Motel for shelter housing.

The Conestoga Hut project (an evidence-based model of housing first) proposes the construction of two temporary micro-shelters on West Union Street, providing essential emergency housing for unhoused individuals while connecting them to supportive services. The micro-shelters offer a safe, lockable space for individuals, bridging the gap between homelessness and stable housing. More than just physical shelter, this project connects residents to wrap-around services offered by The Gathering Place and partners, including case management and pathways to employment or other sustainable income sources, all essential to achieving lasting stability. This will be a one-year proto-type project, and results will be measured to ensure the project is making an impact for unhoused community members and to ensure the surrounding community on West Union is not negatively impacted.

Housing insecurity has surged since the pandemic, fueled by decades of underinvestment in affordable housing, healthcare, and community-based services. In our region, this is made worse by lack of affordable housing stock and living-wage jobs.

From working with the unhoused population, we know that there are an endless number of reasons that people don't have housing –reasons that could (and in some cases have) happened to us or to the people we love. Loss of job, long-term illness, foreclosure on a home are just a few examples that we regularly see.

It's hard to pin down the average number of residents who are unhoused, but conservative estimates, and our experience, put it in the dozens. The Gathering Place served 64 unhoused individuals between July and September. That's a lot of folks who are sleeping rough, and who are at an especially high risk in bad weather.

We know from experience that ensuring unhoused community members have regular access to available services and a regular place to sleep at night reduces risks and improves overall community health for everyone. The Conestoga Hut Project's West Union Street location ensures accessibility and visibility while reinforcing our shared commitment to addressing this challenge. We hope other community members can support this project as part of Athens County's broader housing security efforts. The Conestoga Hut Project is not just a temporary fix, but a step toward systemic solutions that will benefit individuals and the larger Athens County community.

Sincerely,

Members of the Athens County Housing Security Co-Create Group (listed on second page)

The John W. Clem Recovery House
Hocking-Athens-Perry County Community Action
Athens Metropolitan Housing Authority
Hopewell Health Centers
Integrate Athens/Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities
Survivor Advocacy Outreach Program
United Campus Ministry Center
Athens County Public Libraries
Integrated Services for Behavioral Health
Athens County Economic Development Council
My Sister's Place
Athens County Family and Children First Council
Athens City School District
Salvation Army Athens Service Unit
Mayor Steve Patterson
Athens County Foundation
Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development
Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine
Appalachian Peace and Justice Network
OhioHealth O'Bleness Hospital
Athens Mental Health Inc.
Voinovich School of Leadership & Public Service at Ohio University
Habitat for Humanity
Ohio University College of Health Sciences and Professions