

# Maria Foscarinis: Report to UN Draws Attention to U.S. Housing Rights Violations

Housing is a human right.

The declaration is simple. It seems intuitive, even.

It is recognized in a number of international agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United States has signed treaties recognizing the right to non-discrimination in housing.

But still, despite the nearly universal recognition that decent, affordable housing is a basic human need, it is not officially recognized as a human right by the United States government.

Last week, the United Nations released the [final report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing on her U.S. mission](#), presenting her findings and recommendations about housing violations in the United States. The report is based on her six-city tour of the U.S. last fall, a visit co-coordinated by the [National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty](#) and the National Economic & Social Rights Initiative. The report also reflects testimonies provided by representatives from homeless and low-income communities at the Law Center's [National Forum on the Human Right to Housing](#).

The Rapporteur's report recommends, among other things:

- \* Increasing resources for public and affordable housing;
- \* Extending the [Protecting Tenants At Foreclosure Act](#) beyond its 2012 sunset;
- \* Making [vacant properties](#) available to housing organizations for the provision of affordable housing;
- \* Developing constructive alternatives to the [criminalization of homelessness](#), and where adequate shelter is not available, homeless persons should be allowed to shelter themselves in public areas;
- \* Expanding the [HUD definition of homelessness](#) to include those living doubled up with others due to economic hardship.
- \* Passing [H.Res. 582](#) in the U.S. Congress and devoting increased resources to the Family Unification Voucher Program.

The Rapporteur will present her report to the UN Human Rights Council on March 5th in Geneva, Switzerland.

This report comes at a critical time for advocates. The current U.S. foreclosure and economic crises are fueling dramatic surges in homelessness. Before the crises, up to 3.5 million Americans experienced homelessness each year. Now, that number is projected to rise by another 2 million. And these figures include only those who are literally homeless--not those doubled up or on the brink of literal homelessness.

The expanding numbers of those affected are focusing increased attention on the need for housing policy reform. At the same time, advocacy efforts are gaining traction. Right to housing campaigns are underway in a number of communities, and [a bill calling for recognition of the right to housing for children and their families](#) (H.Res. 582) has been introduced in Congress. New federal protections for tenants in foreclosed properties have been enacted. National housing trust fund legislation has been enacted. A new federal law requires the federal government to develop a national plan to end homelessness by this May, spurring advocacy for new resources and policy reform.

I believe there is now a window of opportunity to begin to shift policy debate to a results-focused, rights-based approach. Later this year, the U.S. will be reviewed as part of the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. This will provide another opportunity to examine the U.S.'s obligations under human rights laws and principles, and to bring again an international focus to need for a significant shift in housing policy.

Simply put, it's time to recognize that everyone needs a decent place to live, and that the clearest way to achieve this result is to recognize housing as a right for all.

It's time to recognize that housing is a human right--right here in the United States.

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