

THE REPORT

Building a Legacy

Former President Jimmy Carter talks of his life's work on affordable housing and the future of public service.

By **Susan Milligan** Senior Writer

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Former President Jimmy Carter and former first lady Rosalynn Carter volunteer on a project with Habitat for Humanity in Mishawaka, Indiana.  (ROBERT FRANKLIN/SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE/AP)

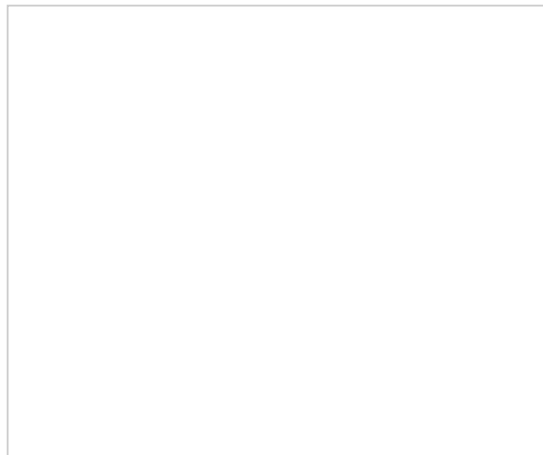
THREE YEARS AGO, JIMMY Carter figured he was facing the end of his life. His melanoma had spread to his brain and his liver. He was 90 years old, and it appeared that the nation would soon be reflecting on a presidential legacy. In Carter's case, it was a legacy less focused on his oft-criticized, single term as president than on his much-lauded decades as an ex-president. Having moved from the nation's most famous house back to his modest home in Plains, Ga., with his wife,

Rosalynn, Carter set to work on a task to fill a basic human need: a decent place to live. Working with Habitat for Humanity, the Carters have been building homes for families in need. To date, the Carter Work Project has been involved, with Habitat for Humanity, in the construction of nearly 4,300 homes in 14 countries around the world. His work as co-founder of the Carter Center, a not-for-profit human rights organization, earned him a Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

Through immunotherapy and what Carter calls his "good fortune," the former president is very much alive, declared cancer-free in December of 2015 and committed to continuing to build homes (literally: the jeans and hardhat-clad Carter can wield a hammer with the best of them). It's a mission he says is now more critical than ever. According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, between 2.5 and 3.5 million Americans each year sleep in shelters, transitional housing and other places not meant for human habitation. Another 7.4 million have lost their homes are doubled up with others so they can have a roof over the heads.

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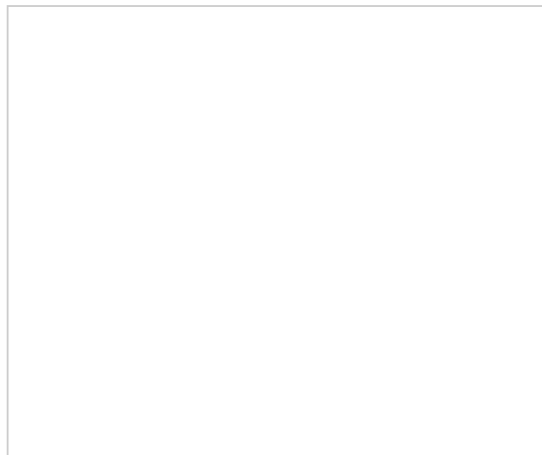
The American dream of home ownership is becoming more elusive for low- and even middle-income Americans. After the real estate market collapse of the Great Recession, home values have rebounded, but would-be buyers are often priced out of the market. According to a report this year by the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, housing construction is at its lowest level per household in nearly 60 years. Construction of new apartments is booming, but centered on luxury spaces too expensive for most young adults. According to a 2017 report by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, nearly half of renters are "cost-burdened," meaning the occupants spend more than 30 percent of their incomes on rent. In virtually no place, the Carter Center notes, can a person afford a one-bedroom apartment on a minimum wage income.



For Carter, having a house is about more than having safe place to sleep. It's about community, a sense of belonging and the dignity that comes with building, maintaining – and paying for, with some help – a home of one's own. At 93 (he'll be 94 Oct. 1), nearly 38 years since he lost his campaign for a second term, 50 years after the enactment of the Fair Housing Act, 35 years since the Carter Center began working with Habitat for Humanity, and 72 years since he married his wife and homebuilding partner, Rosalynn, Carter is still toiling away at what has become his life's work. Taking a brief break from a home-building project in Indiana, U.S. News spoke with Carter about where the nation has come and what it needs to do – on housing and good governance. Excerpts:

You've talked about housing as being not just a human need, but a human right. What do you mean by that?

The basic principle of human rights is just treating other people equally. And that includes both government and private life. I would say that one of the basic human rights is having a decent place to live, and raise a family. Another basic human right is to have a modicum of education [so you can] take advantage of the talent and ability that God gave you. And another basic human right is medical care. A lot of those things, in addition to freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the right to assembly guaranteed in the constitution, are basic human rights. In Habitat, this is a basic human right, not only to build a decent home for people, but also just to treat everybody the same.



"One of the basic human rights is having a decent place to live, and raise a family."

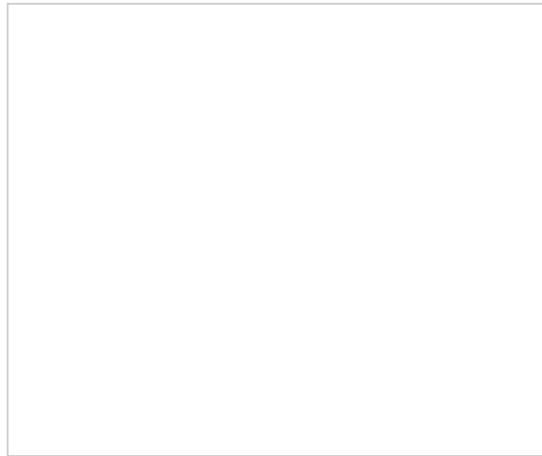
You're in the middle of a project now to build 22 homes in Mishawaka, Indiana. Can nonprofits like Habitat fill the affordable housing gap?

Unfortunately, in our country – and around the world as a matter of fact – although Habitat has done a tremendous job, the need for public housing and low-income housing is increasing every

day. We have finished houses for people to move into every 50 seconds of every 24 hours. We are doing the best we can but we are still falling further and further behind.

We used to look at homelessness and blame it on mental illness, drug abuse, domestic violence. Now, the main reason is the lack of availability of affordable housing. How did that problem develop, and what should government and the private sector be doing to address it?

I think all government – federal and state and local – can help. We've seen that happen here, with building homes this year, everybody working together on that, and with the private sector. [In Indiana, Greater South Bend-Mishawaka Association of Realtors raised money for the project. Habitat for Humanity says it will accept government funds as long as there are no restrictions that violate the group's principles, including its Christian identity.] I think the main thing is for everybody to realize [we should] treat our neighbors the same way as we treat ourselves. For all of us who have a decent home, we need to realize there are many people around us who don't.





Former President Jimmy Carter attends an interview in Atlanta. 📷 (JOHN AMIS/AP)

And that has effects beyond just the basic need for shelter...

It kind of tears the whole structure of our family down. And when you tear the structure of family down, you make that person dependent on government. All of us feel that most families ought to be self-sufficient and paying taxes like everybody else is, supporting the school system and so forth. [Those selected for a Habitat for Humanity home must put in hundreds of hours of "sweat equity" to build the home, and be able to repay an affordable mortgage.]

We need to make sure everyone realizes the need for low-income housing is increasing every year. The rents are sky-high and the price of building a new house is going up, too.

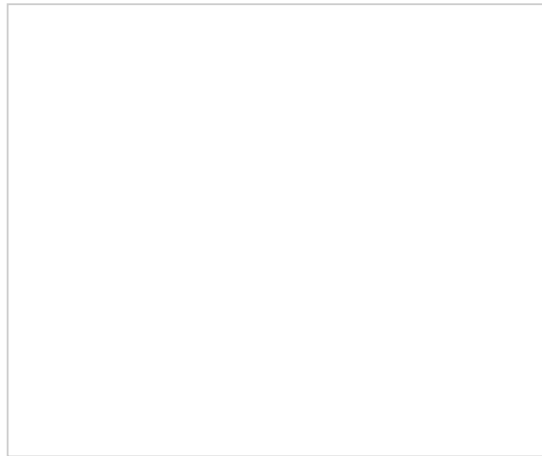
Housing doesn't even have its own committee in Congress, as you know. In the Senate, it's part of the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, and in the House, it doesn't even get named billing. It comes under the Financial Services Committee. What does that say about the federal commitment?

I think [part of it is] the inadequacy of the Congress to get along with each other, and the polarization of American voters in every area of America. That's happened since I was in office, a

long time ago. And that polarization of America, the dividing of America into two factions, keeps government from being adequate.

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When I was in the White House, of course many years ago, public housing was a major commitment. And we had some of our key congressional committee assignments to provide housing for people in your own district. It was one of the most effective things you could do [as a congressman]. But nowadays, as you say, public housing has a much lower priority in the federal government than it did before.



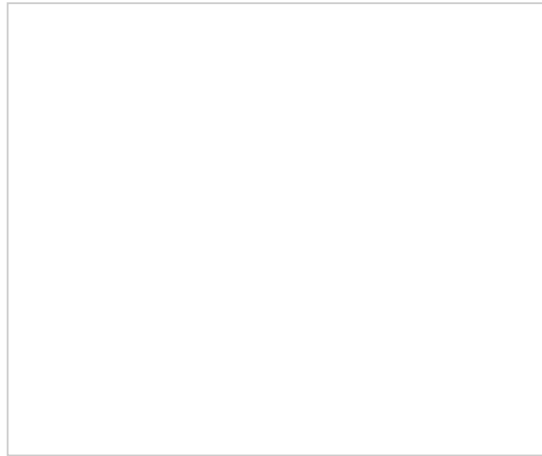
Why does owning a home matter – why not house people in rentals?

The average person on the street who lives in a very nice house doesn't realize a lot of neighbors are paying extraordinary prices for rent. And of course, when you're renting a place, you don't really care what it looks like or how the lawn is mowed or how well the place is maintained, because it belongs to somebody else. But when you get a Habitat house, you have an innate pride in keeping your own house, for which you have paid full price, and for which you have put in hundreds and hundreds of hours of work, you can take a lot of pride in that house because it belongs to you. That's what Habitat houses do.

You mentioned the deterioration of relationships in Washington. What do you make of what's happening in D.C. now, from the inability to pass bills to the criticism of the White House for not keeping its flag lowered in honor of Senator John McCain?

The basic goal of politics is to correct the mistakes that we make. We've had some serious mistakes in this country. We've been in wars that weren't necessary. We fought each other in the Civil War. We had 100 years of racial segregation approved by the government. The major things, we've been able to overcome, things that go to the basic principle of democracy and freedom.

I think we still have that opportunity to correct our mistakes. Even in what I think was the very bad treatment and mistaken treatment of Senator McCain, the White House finally tried to correct their mistakes, because they were criticized by both friends and critics of the incumbent president. Eventually, we correct our mistakes, and I hope we will do that in the case of politics and also in the case of low-income housing. If it's corrected, like in the Habitat project we are working on today – that is about the basic principles of America that make us all proud.



Given the way things are, with the divisions, would you recommend government service to young people?

I would. The future of our commitment to peace and to human rights depends on young people. Young people still have confidence in the future, and there's really no limit on what the future can hold for them.

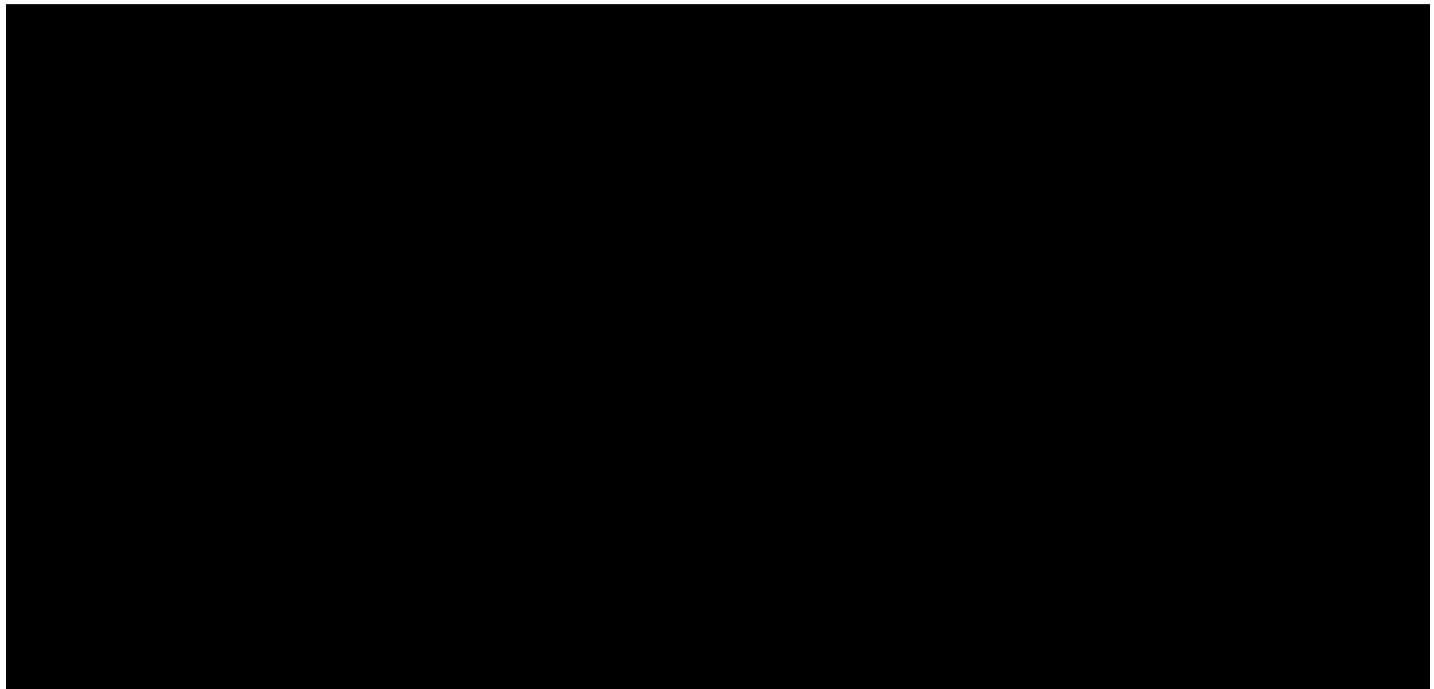
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You had quite a health scare a few years ago, but you're still back at home construction sites. I have to ask – can you still pound in a 16-penny nail in three hits?

[Laughs]. I can still do that. Maybe it takes four now. I can't really (hit) a nail as I used to.

We still put in our time, and God has given us a good chance for an extended life, which we didn't expect me to have. Three years ago, I thought I was going to die in three weeks. That's all I had time to live, I thought, but with the advances made in medicine, and the good fortune I've had in having good doctors and scientists working with me – we've been fortunate. One of the things we can do to repay our good fortune is to help other people have a better life. And that's what happens with Habitat.





Susan Milligan, Senior Writer

Susan Milligan is a political and foreign affairs writer and contributed to a biography of the ... [READ MORE »](#)

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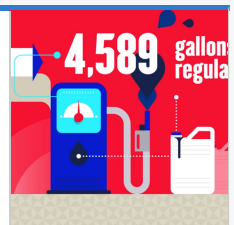
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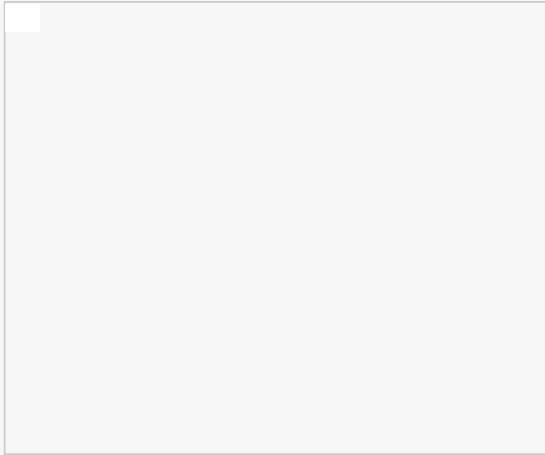


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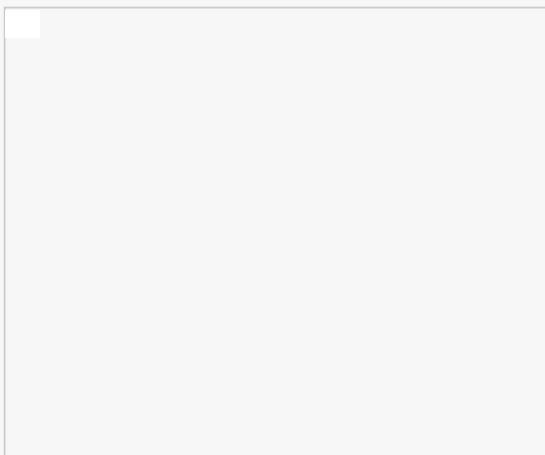
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