



OCTOBER 2018

COALITION NEWSLETTER

COALITION TO END UNCONSTITUTIONAL PROPERTY TAX FORECLOSURES

2018 Year In Review: Coalition Goals and Victories

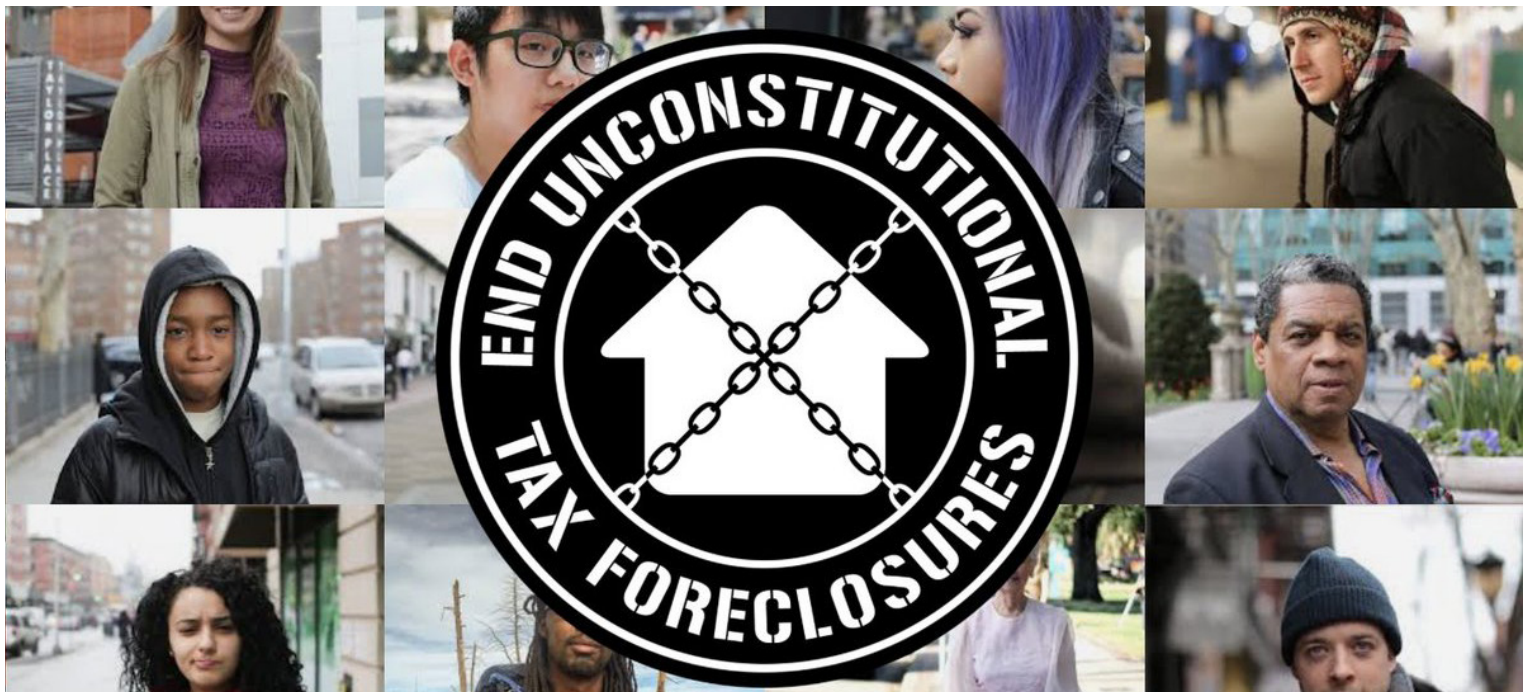
In 2017, individuals from several long-standing grassroots organizations in Detroit united to form the Coalition to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosures. Our purpose is to address the illegality and severity of the property tax foreclosure crisis. With our collective power, we set out to accomplish three goals: (1) stop unconstitutional property tax assessments; (2) compensate Detroit residents who have already lost their homes through illegal tax foreclosures; and (3) suspend pending property tax foreclosures until it is confirmed that the delinquent taxpayers were not unconstitutionally assessed.

Since the Coalition's inception, we've accomplished an impressive amount of work toward reaching these three goals. From starting an unprecedented Dignity Restoration Housing Program, to shaping the settlement of a groundbreaking lawsuit, to building an interfaith education program--our member organizations haven't stopped fighting for the rights of Detroit's working families. While the Coalition's work is ongoing, we'd like to highlight the wins we've managed to achieve in the past year.



Who We Are

The Coalition to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosures is fighting for those who have lost their homes, or are at risk of losing their homes, due to unconstitutional tax foreclosures. In addition to individual community members, the Coalition is comprised of the following grassroots community organizations: We the People of Detroit, Community Development Advocates of Detroit, Detroit Peoples Platform, Loveland Technologies, Central Detroit Christian, Neighbors Building Brightmoor, Street Democracy, Engage Michigan, Detroit Action Commonwealth, Jews for Justice, Tricycle Collective, Bridging Communities, Good Jobs Now, and MACC Development.



DIGNITY RESTORATION HOUSING PROGRAM



As part of the Coalition's second goal, which is to compensate Detroit residents who have already lost their homes through illegal tax foreclosures, we developed a program to provide funding for homes through the Dignity Restoration Housing Program (DRHP). On June 18, the Coalition handed off a home to the first official program recipient: Sonja Bonnett. We are also now working with the Detroit Land Bank, which now owns many homes that were improperly assessed in the first place, to acquire more homes. In addition, we have finalized a draft of a compensation ordinance, which will include the DHRP as one of several options the city can employ in the compensation process, along with home repair loans, tax abatements for people who have purchased another home, etc.

ACLU SETTLEMENT

The city of Detroit recently settled a lawsuit focused around the Homeowners Property Tax Assistance Program (HPTAP, formerly known as the poverty tax exemption) brought by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Michigan, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the law firm of Covington and Burling. This is a huge win for the Coalition, as the language of the court order directly reflects our expressed demands. Whereas during the peak of the property tax foreclosure crisis, HPTAP involved a slew of unnecessary and overly complex bureaucratic barriers to applying for the poverty tax exemption, the court order forced the city to streamline the application process and provide assistance to eligible populations in applying.

Second, the court order also includes a provision that allows homeowners whose homes are listed for foreclosure to purchase their homes back for \$1,000 if they can prove that they would have qualified for the poverty tax exemption between 2014 and 2017. This will directly help suspend pending property tax foreclosures until it is confirmed that delinquent taxpayers were not unconstitutionally assessed. The entire settlement lasts 3 years, so we are currently working with Councilmember Pro Tem Mary Sheffield to pass an ordinance that makes the changes permanent.

DJJ COMMUNITY EDUCATION WORKSHOPS



Detroit Jews for Justice (DJJ) has been spearheading the Coalition's efforts to educate faith communities about the property tax foreclosure crisis. A crucial part of this work has been the implementation of a new faith-based community education workshop program, the first of which was held last June at the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue. By covering the basics of the property tax assessment process, the tax foreclosure crisis, the root causes of poverty and community disinvestment, and the Coalition's overall work around these issues, the Coalition hopes to raise awareness and garner more support. The workshop was

attended by over twenty community members, who had the opportunity to not only discuss and reflect on these issues but also to learn more about how they can contribute to the Coalition's work.

DJJ's Land & Housing Liaison and veteran Coalition member Gabriel Slabosky led the workshop. "I think that the coalition and the people of the city of Detroit are starting to win on this issue," Slabosky said. "If we can make sure that people know about HPTAP (the Poverty Tax Exemption), and can easily apply for it, if we can make sure that tax assessments are fair, if we can make sure that people who have lost their homes receive compensation--that is at least a start to healing some historical wounds and a long way toward keeping this from ever happening again." He noted that when momentum picks up this quickly, we are witnessing what it looks like when a grassroots movement builds power and creates change.

The Coalition will continue to facilitate workshops as part of the faith-based community education program. To attend or support this program, or if you are interested in having the workshop at your own house of worship, block club, or other community venue, the Coalition's contact information can be found listed at the end of this newsletter.



MEDIA ACHIEVEMENTS

We would be remiss not to reflect on the widespread media attention our cause has received over the past year. Our media campaign has put a lot of pressure on the city to resolve the problem of unconstitutional tax assessments and the resulting illegally inflated property taxes. Bernadette Atuahene has published opinion pieces in *The New York Times* and has expressed our demands in interviews with huge media outlets like the *Tavis Smiley Show* and *Democracy Now!*, while local press like *The Detroit News* has also spread the word on our events. The tax foreclosure crisis has also spurred attention from other media outlets both national, like *The Washington Post* and *Vice News*, and local, like *Detroit Metro Times* and *Detroit Free Press*. Media coverage of our Coalition's work and the movement at large is crucial as we move forward in the fight to support dispossessed families in Detroit.

Vice News



DETROIT'S HOUSING CRISIS IS THE WORK OF ITS OWN GOVERNMENT



As proud as we are of our accomplishments thus far, we have so much more to do. If you'd like to keep up-to-date with the Coalition's work or happenings in the fight to end tax foreclosures in Detroit, you can subscribe to our email list and follow us on Facebook and Twitter.



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