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A new Minnesota program represents a triple win for Minnesotans

By Khalique Rogers and Joe Nathan

The Minnesota Housing agency will grant about \$100,000 each to five communities to create or expand programs in which students learn construction skills as they build housing for low-moderate income people. Our organization has written [six free case studies](#) that offer examples of current Minnesota high school home construction programs from which people can learn.

Two examples:

· In St Paul, high school students worked with a number of partners to rehab a building in bad condition, turning it into 10 attractive apartments for veterans who had experienced homelessness. More information here: [Case Study #4 – Building housing for veterans](#)

Building Housing for St Paul Area Veterans This case study is based on information provided by Sean Hart and Becky Brink Ray of Goodwill/Easter Seals of Minnesota (GESMN), and Tony Zahradke of GAP School in St Paul, in partnership with the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV) Interviews took place October- November 2023. The project ... [Continue readingCase Study #4 – Building housing for veterans](#)

high school students have been building homes for more than 20 years. With assistance from community partners, the most recent three-bedroom house that students constructed was completed for less than \$100,000 (not including the cost of land) This case study includes a 90-second video of one of the most recent homes. See it here:

[Anoka-Hennepin Student-Built Homes Case Study](#)

As of the 2024-25 school year, Anoka-Hennepin Public Schools students have been building homes for more than 20 years. The case study below describes some of what has happened in the past, and what happened during the 2023-24 school year. Students typically spend two hours per day working on this project through the district's STEP ... [Continue readingAnoka-Hennepin Student-Built Homes Case Study](#)

Rep. Matt Norris of Blaine, one of the lead authors of the legislation that created the program, believes the law won bipartisan support because it's a "win-win-win — win for students, win for people seeking housing, and win for the construction industry that needs more employees."

In December 2024, Minnesota Housing awarded two grants to carry out these ideas. The program is expanding to support about five additional projects because it makes so much sense. Minnesota Housing Commissioner Jennifer Leimaile Ho told us, "When I travel around the state, I hear the same challenge everywhere: it's hard to attract employees when there isn't enough affordable housing. To tackle this, we need bold and creative solutions, and this program is an incredible step forward."

She continued, “We’re thrilled that both the Fairmont Area Schools and the Martin County West School District were selected. ... We are excited to see the positive impact this program will have in their communities. The overwhelming interest has been amazing.”

The 2023 Legislature agreed with a broad, bipartisan alliance that included the Catalyst for Systems Change, where we work, educators, physicians, economic development professionals, advocates for people experiencing homelessness and young people themselves.

One young man, Aung Myo Way, an immigrant to the U.S. who participated in his school’s home construction, told legislators that he spent 15 years in a Thailand refugee camp.

“My life was so hard,” he said. “I was living in a wooden box that was hardly bigger than a doghouse. We barely had enough food; we always ate every last grain of rice and any insect or animal we could find. However, after coming to the U.S. and participating in the GAP home construction program, today I make more than \$40 per hour as a journeyman in the union, and I own my own home.”

Other students in home construction programs describe benefits. Several years ago, one of us visited a Forest Lake Public Schools home construction program. One student reported that before joining the program, he disliked and often skipped school. But “since they call this school, I’m here every day. I love it.”

Another young woman participated in a similar program run by a group of districts. She explained: “School means a lot more now. I love learning and working with my hands.”

There is a great opportunity for unions, construction other companies, cities, counties and schools to work together for common goals.

Applications are due March 6. Application information is available here: <https://www.mnhousing.gov/homeownership/community-initiatives-programs/impact-fund.html> .

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