



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
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OFFICE OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT
AND RESEARCH

“Breaking Barriers to Affordable and Abundant Housing: A German-U.S. Comparison of Publicly Led Development Projects” by Yonah Freemark

Foreword

Partner nations in Europe face many of the same challenges in ensuring access to affordable housing. To share experiences and identify best practices, HUD partnered with the German federal government on an initiative called “Breaking Barriers: Affordable Housing in Cities for All.” The city-to-city exchange project from 2022 to 2024 convened local leaders from six U.S. and German cities for workshops, site visits, and discussions. The initiative was designed to help the city participants overcome barriers to affordable housing and sustainable development in their communities. Project participants included municipal policymakers from Atlanta, St. Louis, and Seattle in the United States, and Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich in Germany; representatives from HUD and the German federal government; and a research team tasked with studying and ultimately distilling the lessons learned over the course of the project into a final report.

The report, which includes cross-site findings and case studies of integrated development projects in the Breaking Barriers cities, informs two urgent questions of policy and practice. First, what are the major impediments to publicly led housing development projects, particularly when it comes to building housing for people with low and moderate incomes? Second, what can U.S. and German cities learn from each other to overcome those impediments?

The report identifies six barriers to publicly led affordable housing development initiatives, including local zoning constraints, difficulties assembling financing for new housing development in low-income communities, divergent financing and implementation calendars, vocal opposition to local development projects (i.e., NIMBYism), short-term political incentives created by frequent elections in the United States, and obstacles generated by federal regulations and bureaucratic systems.

The case studies of Breaking Barriers cities also highlight four areas of opportunity: using publicly owned land to reduce costs, integrating financing and development planning to advance transit-oriented development, creating multi-stage resident engagement processes to generate local buy-in, and adjusting regulations like zoning and building codes to facilitate additional housing development.

These transnational findings should benefit local policymakers in the United States, Germany, and elsewhere who, like the Breaking Barriers city leaders, hope to integrate housing and transportation investments in publicly led development projects with the goal of creating mixed-use, mixed-income, sustainable communities. Applying evidence-based policy approaches to this goal is

particularly important against a backdrop of rising income inequality, affordable housing shortages, and climate crises.

This study, conducted by the German Marshall Fund and the Urban Institute, reflects PD&R's longstanding commitment to transnational research partnerships that advance the mission of HUD and the mutual interests of the United States and our partner nations. The insights gleaned from the Breaking Barriers city case studies demonstrate the value that these cross-border exchange initiatives have, both for the policymakers who participate in the exchanges and for the researchers and practitioners who seek to learn from their experiences.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Todd M. Richardson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent horizontal stroke at the beginning.

Todd Richardson

General Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development