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Blaine County debuts affordable housing for school employees

Ryan Suppe | 08/05/2024

HAILEY – Raechel Driscoll worked at the Blaine County School District for five years before a family emergency forced her to leave. When she decided to come back after a year and was offered a job with the district, Driscoll searched for a place to live for nearly a month.

Rental prices in the Sun Valley area – best known as a ritzy getaway for the wealthy – were unattainable for Driscoll, an administrative assistant with a teenage daughter. She also makes too much money to qualify for income-restricted housing.

Then the school district, in partnership with a local affordable housing developer, presented an opportunity. Blaine County School District and Advocates for Real Community Housing (ARCH) had just finished building five rent-controlled homes – only available to district employees. Driscoll's application was accepted and she's moving in this month.

"It definitely made the difference between my ability to be in the valley and come back to what I consider home and my daughter's home," she said. "Without it, I don't know that I would have been able to pull it off."



The Blaine County School District partnered with a local nonprofit, Advocates for Real Community Housing, to build eight rent-controlled units for school staff. This fourplex was completed in July of 2024. (Photo: Ryan Suppe/EdNews)

In Idaho resort communities, housing costs are a barrier for recruiting and retaining school employees. Some candidates don't apply, knowing housing is too expensive, while others renege

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employees. Some candidates don't apply, knowing housing is too expensive, while others renege on jobs when they can't find a place to live, [Idaho Education News previously reported](#). Some teachers have [lived on the streets](#).

That's why school districts in Blaine County and McCall – another resort community in the mountains north of Boise – are building their own housing for staff. Last week, Blaine administrators and trustees, their developer partners and donors cut the ribbon on new units, a four-plex of three bedroom homes and a detached studio apartment.

Less than a month after rental applications opened, all the units are spoken for.

"It speaks to how desperately the housing is needed and to how committed the school district is to solving problems quickly," said Michelle Griffith, executive director of ARCH.

By the numbers: Why housing is out of reach for some district employees

Blaine County School District employees are well-compensated compared to workers in other Idaho school districts. Blaine teachers are the highest paid in the state, [earning nearly \\$91,000 per year on average](#).

Still, housing is difficult to come by for two reasons.

First, buying or renting a home is expensive.

A new report from the Blaine County Housing Authority and the Wood River Land Trust showed that Blaine County's median home price is \$1 million. That's after an increase of 111% from 2019 to 2023. During the same period, the average wage only grew by 33%. The Idaho Mountain Express [first reported](#) the study.

Rental prices are also sky high. Someone who earns \$91,000 per year should spend less than \$2,300 per month on their rent or mortgage, according to a 30% budget for housing, which is commonly recommended by financial experts.

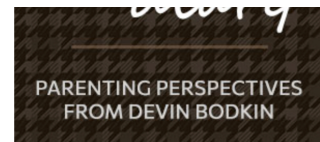
Current rent for Blaine County listings on Zillow range from \$1,795 for a 360-square-foot studio apartment to \$13,500 for a luxury condo. The average listing for a three-bedroom townhouse, like the ones built by ARCH, is more than \$3,750 per month.

Second, most school district employees don't qualify for housing assistance.

Housing assistance programs restrict eligibility based on income, often at 80% (low) or 50% (very low) of an area's median income.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development, which sets the income limits for housing assistance for statewide Idaho programs, defines low income in Blaine County as \$51,650 or less for a single person and \$73,750 or less for a household of four.

In other words, Blaine County School District employees often earn too little to afford a home while earning too much to qualify for assistance.



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Education officials, nonprofit leaders and donors in Blaine County cut a ceremonial red tape to signify the completion of five new affordable housing units reserved for school employees on July 30, 2024. (Photo: Ryan Suppe/EdNews)

Tenants of the new Blaine County homes will pay no more than 30% of their adjusted gross income for rent. And there's another deduction for tenants with student loan debt, if their

college degree is related to their job.

During a ribbon-cutting event last week, district administrators and ARCH executives touted the speed at which the five new homes were financed and built. In 2022, District leaders contacted ARCH – a nonprofit that’s built more than 130 affordable housing units since 2009 – to develop a vacant lot adjacent to the district’s office in Hailey.

ARCH raised the funds – about \$400,000 per house – and built the homes in just two years.

“It’s perfect that this is a red ribbon today,” said Blaine County Superintendent Jim Foudy. “We love cutting through red tape, which is why this happened in two years from conversation to reality.”

Roughly \$3.2 million in donations is financing a total of eight housing units reserved for district staff in Blaine County. Almost one third of that money came from a single donor: Jeanne Herberger, an Arizona businesswoman and philanthropist who owns a summer home in the Sun Valley area.

Herberger lauded ARCH’s frugality. “It’s just amazing how conservative they are,” she said during the ribbon-cutting, noting that the group only has four employees. “I’m just so proud of them for what they have accomplished for people in our district.”

Herberger was the “biggest driver” of the fundraising effort, Griffith said. But a number of other people chipped in. Herberger challenged the nonprofit to raise \$2 for every \$1 that she donated.

“That got us to \$3 million very quickly,” Griffith said.

ARCH collected nearly \$1 million during one fundraising event in 2022. And a retired architect, Martin Kaplan, volunteered to design the homes. Griffith said ARCH is willing to share its construction plans with other school districts.

“They’re already drawn and engineered,” she said. “It’ll save them a little bit of money and a little bit of time.”



From left to right: Jeanne Herberger, a businesswoman and philanthropist; Michelle Griffith, executive director of Advocates for Real Community Housing; and Jim Foudy, superintendent of the Blaine County School District, pose for a photo in one of five newly completed affordable housing units reserved for school staff. (Photo: Ryan Suppe/EdNews)

The unique partnership between a school district and an affordable housing developer is drawing attention. Foudy said he’s been asked to discuss the project with the Idaho School Boards Association as well as a group of superintendents in Michigan, where high-end resort communities on the Great Lakes struggle with housing issues.

“A good idea sometimes resonates and then strikes a universal chord,” Foudy said. “We’re not just helping local people in Blaine County, we’re helping other districts find similar solutions for their people.”

The homes in Blaine County aren’t a permanent solution for Driscoll and the other new tenants, however. They’re meant to be bridge housing, and the tenants are expected to find alternate accommodations within two years. Driscoll said she’s already on a waiting list for ARCH’s other affordable housing options. In the meantime, the school housing was a “life-changing opportunity.”

“I’m grateful for it,” she said.

Further Reading: [School leaders in two resort towns get creative to offer affordable housing for](#)



Ryan Suppe

Senior reporter Ryan Suppe covers education policy, focusing on K-12 schools. He previously reported on state politics, local government and business for newspapers in the Treasure Valley and Eastern Idaho. A Nevada native, Ryan enjoys golf, skiing and movies. Follow him on Twitter: @ryansuppe. Contact him at ryan@idahoednews.org

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