

YIMBY ACTION

YIMBY LAW

# TURNING LAWS INTO HOMES

## Effective Strategies for Housing Legislation Implementation

by Andrew Gothard, Director of Advocacy at YIMBY Action

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# A Letter from the Directors

Passing pro-housing legislation is often the culmination of years of work. But after the signing ceremonies are over and the applause has faded, the frustrating work of implementing legislation begins. What once seemed like a clear directive for decisive action can quickly deteriorate into a frustrating effort to nail policy-jello to the wall.

Will a regulatory body, newly empowered with its legislative directive, actually crack down when cities ignore the new rules? Will planning departments in hundreds of suburbs change their procedures, update their websites, and accept applications for a new program? Will a homeowner attempting to build their first ADU even realize when they're getting the run-around from their local government? How much potential housing will get chewed up when there are creative interpretations of new laws?

New laws create opportunities for policy change, but they do not ensure good outcomes. Dead-letter housing supply laws and unenforced regulations are sitting on the books, just waiting for organizations to breathe new life into them. This is why YIMBY Action's advocacy and YIMBY Law's implementation efforts are vital to the success of the housing movement. With over 80 YIMBY Action chapters in 28 states, we've seen time and time again that new pro-housing laws don't amount to much without advocates continuing to push for full implementation.

The status quo is one in which many communities are accustomed to resisting new housing with broad local discretion. Moreover, anti-housing activists have been known to file lawsuits, push cities to adopt malicious compliance strategies, and generally undermine the intent of pro-housing legislation. As pro-housing activists, we must adopt similar strategies to ensure the boldest versions of legislation show up on the ground.

Through a variety of strategies, organizations can achieve better outcomes – but it takes wide-ranging tactics to ensure housing isn't just a dream someone typed into state laws, local ordinances, and housing development plans. We hope this handbook will help anyone who wants to make housing real and to hold decision-makers accountable.



**Laura Foote**
Executive Director
YIMBY Action



**Sonja Trauss**
Executive Director
YIMBY Law

# Bridging the Implementation Gap: Moving Intention to Impact

In YIMBY Law's work with YIMBY Action, both in California and across the country, we have learned one fundamental truth: passing laws is not housing unblocked. Getting housing abundance laws on the books is only the first step on the long road to building new homes. Reports from across the country on the impact of legislation tell a similar tale of two steps forward, one step back. YIMBY Law's 2025 report on California's implementation woes is clear: "The groundbreaking housing legislation passed in California since 2021 has had limited to no impact on the state's housing supply to date."

So how do we move from housing policy to housing progress? How do we turn potential housing into real homes? To meet the needs of the housing abundance movement, YIMBY Law has developed a variety of tactics to meet implementation needs across the United States. In four states, we have launched statewide coalitions we call Housing Accountability Taskforces (HATs), with the goal of connecting the policy experts with reports on what is happening on the ground. We collaborate directly with pro-housing local officials, send enforcement letters to non-compliant localities, file direct legal action, and more. The tactics we have developed are outlined in this guide, and we hope they will be of great value to other organizations looking to replicate or collaborate on this work.

By building nimble networks of experts and activists, YIMBY Law is leading the national effort to unblock housing and ensure that pro-housing laws are implemented accurately, equitably, and sustainably.

# Our Spectrum of Interventions

The following spectrum outlines activities that make up the implementation toolkit developed by YIMBY Law and YIMBY Action, and it provides tangible examples of each intervention. For easy review, it is organized into four sections emphasizing narrative change, political pressure, local housing project advocacy, and formal legal enforcement. When used in conjunction, these efforts can unblock tens of thousands of new homes from existing legislation. Moreover, they are especially impactful when deployed in collaboration with a network of local partners.

# Building Awareness and Shifting the Narrative

When most people think of legal implementation, they imagine dramatic courtroom battles and bombshell revelations. However, we can't discount the role general education plays in empowering the public to keep their elected officials in line. By drafting legislative explainers, posting blogs and social media campaigns, and coordinating with the press, our team builds successful pro-abundance narratives that set the boundaries of what decisionmakers feel is legal and appropriate. These narrative guardrails make implementation easier and more effective, especially in cities that aim to comply with the law.

## Explainers for Target Stakeholders

Targeted explainers, analyses, and trainings about newly passed legislation, including the goals of the legislation, what it requires, and talking points for bureaucrats and other decision makers. Audiences (and potential co-authors) include coalition partners, planning departments, local governments, developers, land use attorneys, and local constituents. Examples include:

- California Fair Housing Elements Website
- New Jersey/Massachusetts Builder's Remedy Primer
- New York Berenson Doctrine Explainer
- Colorado State Preemption Authority Analysis
- Lakewood, Colorado Open Space Ballot Initiative Explainer
- Virginia Dillon Rule, Home Rule, and Citizen Initiatives Explainer




YIMBY Law's Campaign for Fair Housing Elements website gives advocates critical information on California cities and counties as the deadlines to set housing production goals approach – and often expire.

# Op-Eds, Blogs, and Social Media Campaigns

Pro-implementation op-eds, blog posts, and social media posts expressing support for recently passed legislation published by local constituents (e.g., YIMBY Action members) and coalition partners. These efforts to shift public narrative ensure the local media landscape has voices of support for local, state, and national compliance.

## YIMBY Law Journal (Blog)

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| YIMBY Law is Fighting the NIMBY Industrial Complex | Why an unjust awarding of attorneys' fees could harm future implementation efforts. |
| CA Builders Remedy, SB 9, Housing Element, and the Threat of Enforcement | Why localities shouldn't let NIMBY neighbors convince them to reduce their site inventory list. |
| Arlington Missing Middle Case: Updates | A summary and explanation of ongoing rulings in Arlington, VA's zoning lawsuit. |
| CEQA and Historic Resources: a Case Study in Los Angeles | How LA's creative interpretation of CEQA and other housing laws puts it at the forefront of anti-housing cities. |
| Illinois Has a Builder's Remedy! | What advocates should know about the new Illinois Builder's Remedy and how it can be supported. |

## YIMBY Member Op-Eds

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| "More Kinds of Housing Would Help Seattle Residents Age in Place" | Seattle YIMBY member Marcia Peterson advocates for senior-friendly affordable housing options in the Seattle area. |
| "For just $763, you can make a lot sit empty for 5 years!" | San Francisco YIMBY member Chuong Vu explaining how abuse of CEQA stops new housing. |

## Press Releases and Media Connections

Press releases or other intentional press outreach to draw attention to local advocacy, legal action, local anti-housing activities, and more. Includes proactively alerting the press to key implementation efforts to ensure effective and balanced press coverage. Media coverage with YIMBY Law staff members quoted is below.

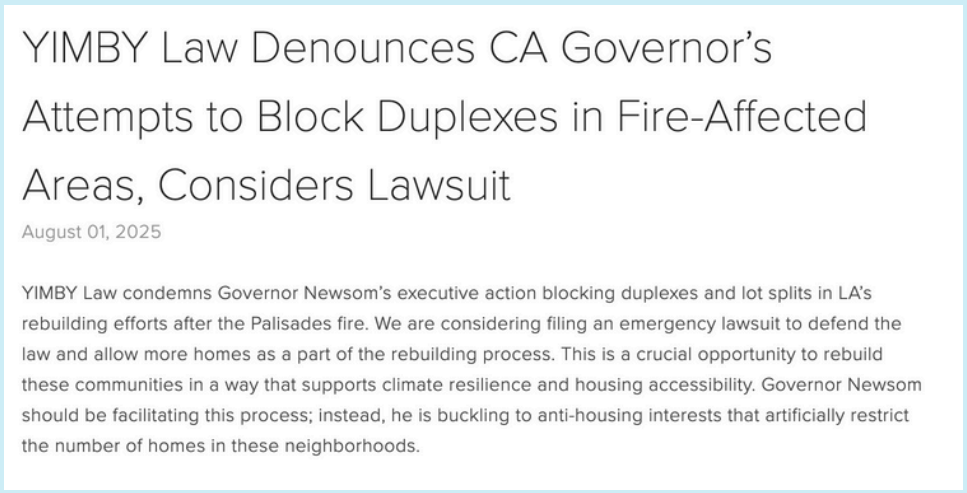
Pacifica Builder's Remedy Application - "In a statement, Sonja Trauss, executive director of YIMBY Law, which advocates for housing development, confirmed the city is legally required to follow SB 330 and the Housing Accountability Act."

Fairfax Resists Multifamily Housing - "'Fairfax is walking into a buzzsaw,' YIMBY Law executive director Sonja Trauss says. 'They are going to waste a lot of money and they are going to lose. They are having an absolute and complete freakout over one project that is not that big a deal.'"

Maryland Affordable Housing Crisis Report - "Jack Farrell, a research attorney for pro-housing development firm YIMBY Law, said this is a national issue, but one that can be solved. 'Leaving the question to local officials will not solve the problem,' Farrell said. 'It did, in fact, create a problem and make it worse. The state taking some more direct authority to make sure that housing is constructed and that it can't be denied for bad or fake reasons would be important.'"

Lakewood Council Acknowledges Illegal Open Space Law - "YIMBY Law, a housing policy legal group, submitted a letter through attorney Jack Farrell. According to Farrell, the measure creates an illegal change in zoning law because it would delay or impair the development of private property, which owners have the right to use reasonably."

California's Housing Laws Having Limited Impact - "'It's grim,' said Sonja Trauss, executive director of YIMBY Law. Though she acknowledged some of the laws are still new, she blamed their early ineffectiveness on the legislative process which saddled these bills with unworkable requirements and glaring loopholes. 'Everybody wants a piece,' she said. 'The pieces taken out during the process wind up derailing the initial concept.'"



YIMBY Law Denounces CA Governor's Attempts to Block Duplexes in Fire-Affected Areas, Considers Lawsuit

August 01, 2025

YIMBY Law condemns Governor Newsom's executive action blocking duplexes and lot splits in LA's rebuilding efforts after the Palisades fire. We are considering filing an emergency lawsuit to defend the law and allow more homes as a part of the rebuilding process. This is a crucial opportunity to rebuild these communities in a way that supports climate resilience and housing accessibility. Governor Newsom should be facilitating this process; instead, he is buckling to anti-housing interests that artificially restrict the number of homes in these neighborhoods.

YIMBY Law's press release in response to Governor Newsom's decision to disallow a hard-fought housing law from applying in certain areas.

# Political Pressure and Advocacy

Raising awareness of housing laws that need implementation to successfully unblock homes doesn't stop at public narratives. Connecting directly with elected officials, boards, and other decision-making bodies is a familiar tactic for lobbying organizations, developers, and technical experts. By writing professional reports and communicating directly with local and state-level decisionmakers, implementation advocates can ensure that key political stakeholders have the information they need to support housing enforcement throughout their jurisdictions.

## Public Reports

Public-facing reports can help advocates create an objective fact pattern about (1) how well or poorly state-level housing laws are working and (2) how easy or hard it is to enforce them. Our reports are typically based on a combination of in-house and external data sources. Audiences can be thought leaders, policy makers, and other stakeholders who have the ability to improve targeted policies.

Examples include:

- California's Streamlining Laws: Lessons from the Field - YIMBY Law's analysis of five recent housing production laws, finding that their impact has been significantly reduced by local resistance, lack of state enforcement, and unrealistic requirements.
- Rezoning Deadlines are Here—and Many California Cities are Stalling - YIMBY Law's tracking efforts of Housing Element rezoning deadlines across the state to hold local governments accountable.
- Virginia Authority Over By-Right Permitting Analysis - YIMBY Law's analysis of how The Dillon Rule excludes local governments from adopting by-right processes without new laws and how this exclusion impacts planned YIGBY legislation.

## Direct Conversations with Electeds, Appointees, and Bureaucrats

YIMBY Law and YIMBY Action staff, legislative coalitions, and local constituents (e.g., YIMBY Action members) meet regularly with decision makers about newly passed legislation to help generate local support for implementation. Sometimes, elected officials also need talking points about what the consequences for violating the law will be in order to move fellow councilmembers.

When elected officials feel they have local support for state-mandated actions, they are far more likely to fully implement pro-housing laws. These relationships can build valuable avenues of communication that can be utilized as implementation opportunities increase or as opposition rears its head. And a happy hour to celebrate their efforts to locally implement a housing law can go a long way. The range of available activities in this work is broad.

**Interactions in Action**

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| Claremont, California Talking Points Memo for Councilmember | The City of Claremont (1) does not have the grounds to violate the HAA and (2) will lose a HAA lawsuit, putting the city on the hook for avoidable heavy fees and fines. |
| Collaboration with Virginia's Commonwealth Housing Coalition | Tactics included: reviewing and drafting key legislation, meeting with elected officials and their staff to share housing law history and research from other states, and consulting with coalition partners about organizing and implementation strategy |
| Implementation Strategy Meetings with Attorneys General in Illinois and Colorado | Implementation strategy meetings with Attorneys General in Illinois and Colorado. Goals: Share implementation lessons from other states, suggest ways to add implementation impact to existing housing law and make connections to local activists who can share the effects of housing law and the limitations on enforcement in their communities |
| "A Toast to More Homes! Happy Hour to celebrate the Family Zoning Plan" | A co-hosted event with the San Francisco Mayor and several Board of Supervisors members ahead of a key hearing for a proposed major upzoning in the city. |

## Backchannelling to State Agencies

Private communications to state enforcement agencies regarding local implementation challenges can induce state agencies to privately or publicly address non-compliance issues with local authorities. These communications are often informational, but they can escalate into more formal briefings for state agencies looking to crack down on recalcitrant cities. While we cannot provide examples of one-on-one sit downs with agencies, we often are able to send documents and supplemental materials such as:

- History of California Housing Laws - Lessons from California, Virginia, and Oregon on the importance of enforcement language. Shared with the Illinois Housing Development Authority.
- Housing Law Enforcement: Attorney General and Private Right of Action - Options for enforcement language sent to Colorado's Attorney General.
- Proposed Amendments to the State Housing Appeals Board Legislation - Comments to the Illinois Housing Development Authority on the Affordable Housing Planning and Appeals Act's (AHPAA) proposed rules, drafted by YIMBY Law and the Institute for Justice.

## Letters to State Agencies About Local Activities

Formal complaints to state authorities about local implementation challenges–requesting formal action on local non-compliance–are often necessary when cities demonstrate they are not interested in complying with the law. This formal reporting will often deeply anger cities that had hoped to quietly break the law. While developers are often the most aware of illegal actions, they are also often the least able to take formal reporting action because of the risk of backlash from cities. This necessitates the work of third-party organizations like YIMBY Law to submit formal complaints.
The key to a successful formal letter is that it provides concrete examples of violations that state agencies can enforce.  Examples include letters to California's Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD) identifying a city's non-compliance with California housing law:

- Sausalito, California Draft Amendment to 2023-2031 Housing Element
- Patterson, California Housing Element Amendment
- Fairfax, California Housing Element Compliance

# Project-Level Advocacy

Almost by definition, implementation of housing law lives and dies in the experiences individual project sponsors have when they use existing legislation to get new projects approved. Will what's written on paper be achievable in practice? Through its collaboration with YIMBY Action, YIMBY Law supports the activist efforts of local volunteers who speak in favor of housing supply at their local Planning and Zoning Boards and City Council hearings. Demonstrating local support frequently tips the balance for decisionmakers who may feel cross-pressures from what a city attorney might say and what anti-housing activists might want.

Providing additional justification and highlighting the consequences for violating new laws is frequently helpful for city council members feeling pressured by neighborhood opponents. Support often appears in the form of enforcement letters to localities who are violating existing housing law by denying a project submission or consultation with volunteers who want to advocate for housing throughout the approval process.

## Housing Proposal Advocacy and Tracking

In collaboration with YIMBY Action, YIMBY Law assists local constituents and coalition partners with organizing to advocate for specific housing proposals by arming them with technical expertise about relevant legislation. Attending these hearings and advocating for project approval is the most immediately accessible way YIMBYs can make change for housing supply. Engaging in project-by-project activism has rippling effects on city governments by altering how bureaucrats and politicians perceive public opinion, which can have wide-ranging impacts on policy choices. YIMBY Action's advocates create a positive public narrative about the importance of state policies in practice for specific housing proposals, pushing narratives about how state policies will help local communities thrive. In addition to in-person public comment, activists generate petitions, write letter campaigns, hold events, and more.

Our toolkit includes:

- Housing Proposal Submission Form - a public-facing form where developers, advocates, electeds, or other community members can upload pending housing proposals to request volunteer advocacy or legal implementation support.
- AI Council Agenda Scraper with Listen Public - an AI tool created specifically for YIMBY Action and YIMBY Law that automatically reads local City Council agendas around the country and notifies our staff and local volunteers about opportunities to take action.
- Submitting Applicable Projects Under the Illinois Builders Remedy - A coordinated campaign encouraging local developers to submit projects to the Illinois State Housing Appeals Board.

## Letters to the City to Convey Legal Exposure

Where appropriate, letters to cities detailing what they are required to do to comply with state housing law and possible consequences for non-compliance. Letters can be triggered in concert with supporting a specific housing proposal or in response to a city announcing they intend to ignore the state law. The tone of each letter can vary from threatening to collaborative, depending on the local attitude toward housing supply.

Examples include:

- Rancho Palos Verdes Site Inventory Reduction - a letter to the Rancho Palos Verdes, California City Council explaining how removing three locations from their Housing Sites Inventory would put them in violation of California's Housing Element Law.
- Littleton City Council Guidance on Illegal Ballot Initiative - a letter to the Littleton, Colorado City Council explaining how a new ballot initiative may be illegal and providing a potential solution through use of a newly passed state law.

## Information Request Letters

Gentle inquiries about the status of local implementation plans, which often appear as letters detailing state law requirements for the city and asking for their plans to comply. These letters usually offer YIMBY Law's expertise as collaborators in compliance efforts.

| Letters Submitted | |
|---|---|
| AHPAA Compliance Notifications | Letters to 44 applicable Illinois localities notifying them of AHPAA submission requirements and offering assistance if they have questions. |
| California Rezoning Compliance Notices | Letters to California cities reminding them of upcoming statutory deadlines. |
| Colorado Compliance Reminders | Letters to Colorado cities reminding them of statutory housing deadlines. |
| San Juan Capistrano Notice | Compliance letter concerning a deadline for the local tenant protection ordinance. |

# Legal Enforcement

When all other efforts fail, it is sometimes necessary for YIMBY Law to file lawsuits, submit amicus briefs and interventions, or take other formal legal action to enforce existing housing law. Although our network of attorneys and advocacy alliances around the country is growing, filing lawsuits is expensive and time consuming. It requires high levels of expertise to go up against local governments who are sometimes accustomed to forcing developers to negotiate and/or outright killing housing proposals by using the long timelines of the judicial process. Third party enforcement is frequently necessary, but it should not be entered into lightly.

## Pursuing Lawsuits

In California, YIMBY Law sues cities directly, as a non-profit whose mission is to increase housing affordability has standing to enforce state law. We hope (and are making plans) to see this type of standing expanded to other states in the future.

### Lawsuit Archive

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| Millbrae Loses Article 34 Fight | YIMBY Law successfully defends homes for unhoused seniors and families in Millbrae, CA. |
| Culver City: Suing the Suburbs | YIMBY Law successfully defeats a Culver City downzoning effort. |
| Holding Los Angeles Accountable for Housing Law Compliance | A lawsuit challenging LA's housing law compliance and unethical calculations to avoid housing growth. |
| Cupertino California Vesting Rights | A lawsuit challenging the City of Cupertino and enforcing the Permit Streamlining Act. |
| Project Enforcement at 450 O'Farrell Street in San Francisco - | A lawsuit challenging the City of San Francisco's denial of a local housing project and enforcing the Housing Accountability Act. |
| Los Angeles ED-1 Violations | Lawsuits challenging the City of Los Angeles's efforts to deny affordable housing in Olinda, Wilbur, and Winnetka. |
| Fighting Corporate NIMBYism in Newport Beach | A lawsuit challenging the City of Newport Beach's denial of a local housing project and enforcing the Housing Accountability Act and the California Environmental Quality Act. |

## Amicus Briefs and Interventions

YIMBY Law also intervenes or submits amicus briefs in support of legal action filed by other organizations or pro-housing activists. This tactic is especially useful outside of California, where YIMBY Law often does not have standing to directly file legal challenges. Examples include:

- Amicus in Favor of Applying AB 1633 to Promote Housing Over Improper Environmental Reviews
- Amicus Condemning La Habra's Illegal Adoption of Housing Element Policies
- Amicus Condemning Redondo Beach's Exclusionary and Improperly Adopted Overlay

## Building a Network of Legal Nonprofits and Land Use Attorneys

In California, YIMBY Law has established a vast network of allied organizations, including Institute for Justice, Pacific Legal, California Housing Defense Fund, Californians for Homeownership, and others, who serve as partners in legal strategy and enforcement activity across the state. We have also built a network of land-use attorneys and legal experts who offer their time and services pro bono. Through these collaborations, YIMBY Law can consult statewide experts to quickly develop effective plans for the most impactful and politically savvy implementation strategies.

Outside of California, YIMBY Law is building Housing Accountability Taskforces (HATs) in key geographies around the country, including Virginia, Illinois, Hawai'i, and Colorado. Currently, HATs are consulting on new pro-housing legislation, building relationships with state-level enforcement agencies, recommending new enforcement improvements to existing housing supply laws, and recruiting networks of stakeholders.

# Impact and Outcomes

Implementation work can sometimes feel like Sisyphus eternally pushing his boulder up the mountain. It can seem that we are surrounded by bad actors and malicious compliance experts, and it is deeply frustrating to watch much-celebrated legislation crumble.

But with these tactics and a motivated movement urging the law forward, we have seen implementation work have clear, tangible outcomes that ensure the potential of new housing bills can be realized.

In Colorado, members of the statewide Housing Accountability Taskforce collaborated with local Lakewood advocates in June to defeat an illegal ballot initiative that would have effectively halted housing development in that community. YIMBY Law has since contacted other Colorado municipalities about how they can deal with similar ballot initiatives to ensure new homes remain possible for tens of thousands of local residents.

In Illinois, YIMBY Law sent enforcement letters to all 44 municipalities covered by the AHPAA, reminding them to submit their growth plans for state approval. To date, over half have submitted, and a majority will be in compliance – an outcome that ensures developers big and small can continue to construct new homes across Illinois.

In Virginia, YIMBY Law has directly supported the Commonwealth Housing Coalition by drafting or revising strong implementation language for pro-housing legislation in Virginia's 2026 General Assembly. This legislation covers housing construction on faith-owned lands (YIGBY), expanded third-party standing to sue when new homes are denied by elected officials, by-right construction of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), and more. Through these efforts, YIMBY Law has embedded robust enforcement mechanisms directly into Virginia Code, ensuring that when pro-housing legislation is passed, it actually produces new homes.

**As of August 2025, YIMBY Law and YIMBY Action's collaborative local housing project advocacy efforts have unblocked almost 20,000 new homes in over a dozen states (and counting). In addition, YIMBY Law has sent over 170 enforcement letters to localities about local project approvals and housing law implementation.**

# Future Needs and Opportunities

YIMBY Action and YIMBY Law's implementation interventions are showing promise and getting results, but much more work is needed to ensure that everyone in America can access a safe, affordable home. We hope this report serves as a call for researchers, funders, other housing organizations, and community members to invest in housing law implementation.

## Researchers and Funders

Practitioners can deeply benefit from partnerships with researchers. Collecting and analyzing data is key to better understanding the impact of each intervention, which also helps project the effectiveness of future interventions. In addition, large scale research could help spur more investment in implementation and encourage other organizations to take on these vital efforts.

Funders interested in low-income housing and racial justice have a key opportunity to prioritize implementation. Without implementation, hard-fought and resource-intensive legislative victories often fail to translate to meaningful effects on people's lives. Low-income housing proposed in high-opportunity, historically exclusionary neighborhoods is most vulnerable to being blocked by anti-housing practices and strong NIMBY constituencies. Intentional and intensive implementation efforts in these geographies are critical to ensuring these homes get built, historic segregationist land use patterns are dismantled, and our low-income community members can access safe, affordable housing near jobs, services, and opportunities.

## Other Housing Organizations

Other housing organizations should feel empowered to attempt these interventions in their communities. YIMBY Action and YIMBY Law can provide support by sharing templates, model language, and boots-on-the-ground experience to help implementation efforts succeed across the country. In addition, we welcome any housing or housing-adjacent organizations in our active states–CO, IL, VA, and HI–to join one of our Housing Accountability Taskforces (HATs).

## Community Members

Local YIMBY volunteers make implementation possible. YIMBYs disseminate educational material, write op-eds, liaise with local decision-makers and state agencies, show up to say "yes" to new housing projects, and even serve as petitioners in lawsuits.  If you haven't taken action yet, sign up to be part of your local YIMBY Action chapter or local housing organization, and consider getting in the fight. You are needed.

# Conclusion

Here's the bottom line: without a strong network to support implementation and enforcement, housing supply laws won't matter, no matter how many we pass. However, without those vital laws, there would be no new supply requirements to enforce.

There are dozens of organizations, including YIMBY Action, actively advocating for better supply laws and policies at every level of our democracy. Coupling the drive for state legislation with implementation experts, like YIMBY Law, will ensure all of that legislative energy doesn't go to waste.

Our elected officials need this support, especially those who know that allowing more homes is the right thing to do but can't vote their conscience without losing their seats. We hope you will join us in this effort to ensure housing abundance–and the ability to enforce it–are the rule rather than the exception.



2025

# TURNING LAWS INTO HOMES

YIMBY ACTION

YIMBY LAW