

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

It can be difficult to gauge the severity of the housing crisis, even for experts. Depending [on the estimate](#), America is short anywhere from 1.5 million to 5.5 million homes. The bare-bones inventory isn't a new problem, but it's worsened in recent years, thanks to still-inflated mortgage rates and home prices. The outlook is no better for renters. Half spend [more than a third](#) of their salary on housing, and affordable units remain scarce, even amid [a historic surge](#) in apartment construction. All of those problems are compounded by [a bunch of other problems](#), from labor shortages and inflation to zoning restrictions and interest rates. In short, there is no simple solution.



The Big Takeaway

Lawmakers in New Hampshire struggled through the mess Monday, debating the merits of a bill that would allow any property owner to build residential units in commercial areas, effectively bypassing zoning statutes in an effort to fast-track projects that might shore up the state's housing stock. [The legislation](#) is one of [a handful of proposals](#) seeking to override local regulations in hopes of spurring residential construction, which advocates say is necessary to meet increasing demand, [the New Hampshire Bulletin reported](#).



*This is just impractical.
(Photo by Getty Images)*

“We need to loosen zoning restrictions to make it easier to build new housing or to allow people to occupy existing structures,” said Rep. Eric Gallagher, a Concord Democrat. “If you’ve got a business leaving, fine. That’s just more room for housing. We need housing more than we need businesses right now.”

But not everyone is sold. Local planning officials told lawmakers the proposals could lead to overcrowding that would stress local resources and infrastructure, including municipal septic systems. Others noted that some cities and towns have changed zoning codes on their own, making the bill an “unnecessary intrusion on local control.”

“All of these large developments have really gone in a very similar path where they have really innovative proposals, and they usually don’t fit entirely within local zoning, but they get buy-in from the community,” said Natch Greyes, government affairs counsel for the New Hampshire Municipal Association.



EXCUSE ME HOW MUCH WOULD IT COST TO RENT THIS
(Photo by Getty Images)

The committee panned the bill in a 15-2 vote, so it's probably doomed. Other proposals may fare better, including [a compromise measure](#) that would create local tax incentives for housing developers and authorize towns to mandate affordable housing construction in certain districts. It's a start, advocates said. But the piecemeal approach won't fix things by itself.

"If we only do a town-by-town approach, we're going to end up with a really uneven landscape ... I don't think it's going to be enough," said Elissa Margolin, director of Housing Action NH, a coalition advocacy group. "We need a variety of tools. This is a very severe crisis."

A new tool is on the way in Nevada after federal officials approved the state's request to allocate Medicaid funding toward housing and supportive services for an estimated 20,300 applicants who self-identified as homeless. Participants in the pilot program will receive help with rent, food and housing-related deposits, as well as specialized case management and housing transition services, [the Nevada Current reported](#).

"Housing and health care go hand-in-hand," said Nevada Medicaid Administrator

Stacie Weeks. “It’s a fact that a person’s overall health and wellness are impacted by where they live. [The pilot program is] a small piece of the puzzle to improve health outcomes and lower the risk of high health care costs that can come from being unhoused.”

The pilot is expected to launch later this year, after the state’s four Medicaid insurers submit coverage plans to the federal government. At the same time, Nevada is seeking [a separate federal waiver](#) to cover housing expenses for a broader range of Medicaid recipients. Both initiatives were prohibited under Medicaid regulations [until 2022](#). Nevada lawmakers attempted to fund similar services in 2019 via legislation, but the state “ran into some state and county administrative challenges” implementing the policy due to “federal constraints and requirements for that benefit,” officials said.



Roofs with a view.

(Photo by Ronda Churchill/Nevada Current)

Officials in Utah are considering locations for a massive new homeless shelter in Salt Lake City, reversing a long-term goal to operate smaller shelters in multiple locations across the state. The reason is simple: Small expansions could not keep pace with a growing homeless population, [the Utah News Dispatch reported](#).

Chronic homelessness has increased by 96% in Utah since 2016, including a 27% surge in the past year alone, [according to data](#) provided to lawmakers by an advocacy group. The new facility, which will house anywhere from 600 to 800 beds, aims to meet the increased demand for services as part of a holistic approach that also incorporates behavioral and mental health resources. Once it's up and running, the system will be "much more robust" than ever, said Bill Tibbitts, deputy executive director of Crossroads Urban Center.

"More beds. More services," he said. "We will clearly have the most beds for getting people indoors in the winter and in the summer when it's really hot and people are at risk of having heat stroke."

It isn't a wholesale overhaul. Anti-camping ordinances are still the norm in cities across the state, though enforcement can be legally dicey if people have nowhere else to go. The expanded shelter capacity will hopefully solve that problem, said [Wayne Niederhauser](#), the state's homeless coordinator and former state Senate president.

"It is our goal and objective to have a place for everybody to go so that there is no camping," he said. "We feel like it's the worst thing that we can accept as a society — people living in places unfit for human habitation. We would like to end that as much as possible. But we do have to answer that question: Where do people go?"

Click your heels three times

- [‘The rent is too damn high’: Maine housing advocates rally for rent relief, homeless shelter funding](#)
- [Minnesota Senate committee advances sweeping housing policy package](#)
- [Head of Strategic Buyout Program resigns, yet another high-profile departure at ReBuild NC](#)
- [South Dakota housing board ‘in the final stretch’ of \\$200 million worth of infrastructure awards](#)



State of Our Democracy

Florida will plow ahead with its presidential primary next week, even though there is sort of no point. President Joe Biden and Donald Trump have [already clinched](#)

their party's nominations. No one is campaigning for primary votes anymore — not Biden, or the seven (!) candidates on the GOP ballot. (Were there ever seven candidates in this thing?) Honestly, this primary is such a non-event that I have already forgotten what I wrote about it in the beginning of this paragraph. Nevertheless, it will proceed, [per the Florida Phoenix](#).



Here we go, again.
(Photo by Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images)

For Republicans, anyway. There will be no meaningless contest [for Democrats](#), thanks to the state party's executive committee, which decided in October it would place only Biden on the primary ballot. People — mostly Dean Phillips and Marianne Williamson — [weren't psyched](#) about this, but the party can do whatever it wants, according to logic and also [a federal judge](#), who rejected a claim from a voter that the decision violated his constitutional rights. And that sealed the deal for the primary under [Florida election law](#), which cancels the whole shebang if a party only has one presidential candidate.

This sort of low-stakes nothing is not new for Florida, which thankfully has not been the focus of American politics since its disastrous starring role in the [2000 election](#). Most likely, Tuesday's primary will be a de facto MAGA meet-up, where Trump diehards mix and mingle and cast pointless ballots that will mysteriously not be decried as fraudulent.

"There's definitely excitement," said James Stratton, the president of the Tampa Bay Trump Club. "Yeah, he's already got the nomination, but we're going to vote for him."

A great time for all

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One Last Thing



*Chopping onions, as provided by the U.S. Constitution.
(Photo by Suterren Studio/Adobe Stock)*

Idaho Republicans [on Tuesday](#) passed [a bill](#) to ban cities and counties from restricting knives, because I guess Republicans now believe that the Second Amendment covers knives, even if that makes people afraid to go to performances or concerts or, you know, in public. Opponents argued the measure could be economically disastrous for civic centers and arts districts, to which state Rep. Jordan Redman shrugged. This bill isn't for those people, he said.

"I understand the concerns," said Redman, a Republican. "Again, this is a Second Amendment bill. This is trying to protect Second Amendment rights for Idahoans, not for outside entertainers."

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