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Tribal housing authority invites non-Native support amid housing crisis

Nora Mabie
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The Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority held a dedication on Aug. 13, 2024, in Pablo for the new Gauthier Homesites. SHANNA MADISON, Missoulian

The Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority has launched a new program that invites non-Natives to “join a community of solidarity,” where members both commit to learning about tribal history and culture and make financial or other contributions to support tribal members in need of housing on the reservation.

Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority (SKHA) Executive Director Jody Cahoon Perez said the initiative “brings people together to meet two different needs.”

“Some tribal members need housing, and some non-Natives need a way to engage with the people who have stewarded this land since time immemorial.”

Communities nationwide face housing crises, and the problem is exacerbated in Indian Country, where people must engage with slow and opaque government processes, where Termination Era policy contributes to widespread inequity and where limited federal funding does not come close to meeting infrastructure needs or community demand.

On the Flathead Reservation — the only reservation in Montana where white residents outnumber Native Americans (in part due to the Flathead Allotment Act) — the problem is acute. Increased demand has led to higher home prices. The median gross rent on the reservation is \$1,406, and the average home value is more than \$400,000.

There are 275 families on the SKHA waiting list, and the new program, **called Nkwúwilš** (meaning “to become one” in Salish), aims to raise \$24,000 by Dec. 31 to secure housing for four Indigenous families.

The funds will allow two families to purchase homes and will therefore open two low-rent units to families on the waitlist. It also aims to remedy a bureaucratic problem. Because SKHA is primarily funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, its 516 rental units are only available to people under a certain income threshold. Experts say those low-income requirements, however, can stand in the way of someone trying to earn more money to become a homeowner.

The Nkwúwilš program was inspired by several similar initiatives, including the **Shummi Land Tax**, which invites non-Natives in California to support the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, and the **Real Rent Duwamish**, which asks Seattle residents to contribute to rent payments for the Duwamish Tribe.

Jenny Mish, a descendant of white settlers who is working with SKHA to develop the Nkwúwilš program, said non-Natives often don’t realize how past policy and historical trauma continues to affect tribes today.

“Many of us don’t understand how the land where we live became private property with a title that could be owned,” she said. “When people find out, some feel a desire to make amends. This program offers a way to do that.”

SKHA plans to offer some community events through the Nkwúwilš program. The first events, called “Saying ‘Hello’ in the languages of this land,” will be held in Missoula and Pablo on Nov. 22 and Dec. 6 respectively. Participants will have the opportunity to contribute to the Nkwúwilš initiative.

For more information, visit **SKHA.org/solidarity**.

By Nora Mabie
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Executive Director of SKHA, Jody Cahoon Perez, speaks during the Gauthier Homesites housing dedication on Aug. 13, 2024, in Pablo.

SHANNA MADISON, Missoulian