FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 17, 2014

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VOLUNTEERS RALLY TO HELP COMMUNITY AVOID MASS HOMELESSNESS

Coalition of non-profits seeks additional support to help mobile home residents with few options.

Richmond, Virginia, September 17, 2014—Throughout the summer, a diverse coalition of non-profit organizations and volunteers has been working tirelessly to help the residents and mobile homeowners at Rudd’s Trailer Park on Jefferson Davis Highway to save their community. With encouragement from the City, the Mobile Home Park (MHP) Coalition submitted a comprehensive work plan proposal last week to the city’s code enforcement office for approval, as a way to help the homeowners address their mobile homes’ Virginia Maintenance Code violations. The Coalition is now preparing—and seeking additional help—for a repair campaign to prevent the mass displacement of the park’s residents.

Since city building inspectors cited most of the homes in Rudd’s for code violations early this spring, the park’s residents have been joined in the massive cleanup and repair project by many concerned neighbors and non-profit organizations. In July, the MHP Coalition was formed as a way to better organize the work, mobilize resources, and identify long-term solutions to the challenges facing the community. Collectively, they have spent thousands of hours cleaning up the park, removing decrepit sheds and porches, making repairs, assessing needs, and planning the work. “It’s been great to see the generosity of all the volunteers and members of the Coalition, with their time and their expertise and contacts,” states Phil Storey of the Legal Aid Justice Center. “I have to believe the results will come for this community.”

Faced with daunting lists of necessary repairs, some of the park’s residents packed up and left their homes this spring and summer. But most of the residents are working to get their homes up to code. Of the community at Rudd’s, 30-year resident Dennis Green says, “I love it. I don’t know what I’d do if I had to move.” Around 50 homeowners so far have signed representation agreements with the Legal Aid Justice Center, to be part of the comprehensive work plan and receive help from the Coalition’s volunteers.

The Coalition’s work team is led by contractor Bobby Nesbitt, manufactured-building professional Durwood Usry of Usry, Inc., master electrician Oswaldo Gavilan of A+ Contractors, LLC, and licensed structural engineer Charles R. Field of Obsidian Inc. They have been joined by many volunteers, including members of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart Social Justice Committee, the Knights of Columbus, First Baptist Church, Sacred Heart Church, and Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity (FIJI) at VCU. Among the Rudd’s residents most deeply involved in the project is Olivia Leon, an 18-year-old senior at Thomas Jefferson High School, who has
volunteered many hours to strategize solutions and facilitate communication between volunteers and Rudd’s residents with limited English skills. Resident Maria Rodriguez is grateful for the help. “We don’t know what to do. If [the Coalition] weren’t helping us, the whole thing would have shut down, I believe.”

Even with the generous support of volunteers and Coalition partners, much more help is needed in the coming weeks and months to carry out their plan, preserve the community, and keep the residents from losing their homes. “Additional financial support and committed volunteers would make a huge difference,” states Coalition member Durwood Usry, “actually providing an opportunity for this community to meet the demands that are being placed on them. It's possible. We just need help.” The needs include finances, building materials and the use of tools, skilled and unskilled labor, the expertise of building professionals, and administrative and organizational support. The Coalition has volunteer opportunities listed at HandsOn Greater Richmond, at www.handsonrva.org. Potential donors or volunteers are also encouraged to contact either Mary Wickham at the Sacred Heart Center (804-230-4399 ext. 319, or mary_wickham@shcrichmond.org) or Mary Frances Charlton of the Legal Aid Justice Center (434-326-8551, or maryc@justice4all.org).

Members of the MHP Coalition include the following non-profit organizations: Better Housing Coalition; Commonwealth Catholic Charities; First Baptist Church of Richmond; Homeward; Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc. (HOME); Legal Aid Justice Center; Project:HOMES; Rebuilding Together Richmond; Richmond Metropolitan Habitat for Humanity; Sacred Heart Cathedral; Sacred Heart Center; Sacred Heart Church; Southside Housing & Community Development Corporation; Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; Virginia Housing Coalition; Virginia Organizing; Virginia Poverty Law Center. Local businesses Usry, Inc., A+ Contractors, LLC, Obsidian Inc., and others are also members of the Coalition, donating their time and expertise. “This group, comprised of so many caring organizations in the metro area, working with City government, is the way to get things accomplished,” according to Jane Helfrich, CEO of Richmond Metropolitan Habitat for Humanity. “I have been so impressed with the commitment of the participants as they've taken the opportunity to enhance the lives of those affected at Rudd's.”

The Mobile Home Park Coalition is a group of social service providers and advocates representing civic, religious, fair-housing, legal and community development organizations. The Coalition came together in response to the City of Richmond’s recent code enforcement efforts focused on mobile home parks. It seeks to avoid the mass displacement of mobile home park residents and facilitate positive long-term solutions to the housing challenges they face.

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