

OPINION

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No Housing Fix Will Work without Jobs

Folks can no longer afford to buy

BY WILLIAM A. COLLINS

Our country has plenty of housing. It's just in the wrong place. There are lots of houses in Detroit, East St. Louis and rural spots where jobs have left. Cheap. But who wants to settle there?

Conversely, housing costs a fortune and is in short supply where the economy is strong. With today's steady downward pressure on wages, many folks can no longer



afford to buy anywhere. Many can't even afford to rent. Worse, any personal trauma can often trigger homelessness.

Our government, unfortunately, has other priorities. In Washington a "housing crisis" doesn't mean a shortage of affordable places to live. Heaven forbid. Instead it means a shortage of mortgage business for Wall Street and a shortage of sales for homebuilders. Or it may just mean a weaker

economy, which would embarrass whatever administration is in office.

Congress has responded to corporate and personal housing woes with a foolish homebuyer's tax credit. As many predicted, this became a bonanza for folks who were planning to buy a home anyway, and for banks who needed a spurt in profitable lending. It also enticed some people into home ownership who won't be able to sustain it. Plus it was expensive to taxpayers.

And it avoided the main problem. Fueled by steady productivity ad-

vances and job exports, our nation simply doesn't offer as much decent employment as it used to. Income is sparser overall. Many Americans are struggling to hang onto their houses and apartments. A lost job, divorce, or illness can push them over the edge into the street. It hap-

housing was sold off or torn down. Today we only build tiny amounts of it, and the budget for replacement units and for Section 8 housing certificates commonly gets siphoned off instead to Kabul.

That's OK for many folks, who don't want any new buildings for the poor in their neighborhood and aren't keen on having such residents scattered around invisibly through Section 8.

Thus even as our familiar social structure decays and as hardship mounts from the disjointed economy, Congress gets political support from average folks back home

not to do anything about housing. The citizens who bother to vote (especially seniors) already have a place to live, thank you.

OtherWords columnist William A. Collins is a former state representative and a former mayor of Norwalk, Conn.

*House is costly,
So is rent;
Next step down
Is to a tent.*

pens every day.

The last time our nation was this short of affordable housing we went out and built some. A lot. Right after World War II. Europe did it too. Over time, people started earning more money and conservatives gained political control. Government

Hope of a Life after Prison

Court decision steps toward fairness

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

The U.S. Supreme Court, which has in recent years been overwhelming conservative in its decisions, showed signs of humanity when it ruled that juvenile offenders under 17 could no longer be sentenced to life without parole for crimes that didn't result in a death.

Calling such sentences cruel and

role for someone so young in a case where no one was killed seems especially harsh.

Currently, 37 states and DC support a life sentence without parole for juveniles in crimes that don't involve a death. Now, as a result of the Court's decision, those local practices must change. There are currently 129 juvenile offenders sentenced under such laws in the U.S.; more than half of them are in Florida, a state known for its tough sentencing laws. At their core, judges across the country must have realized that handing down such a punishment in these types of cases



With their ruling...asks that judges act fairly – and humanely - when handing down sentences.

unusual punishment, and in violation of the Constitution's Eighth Amendment, the Justices ruled 6-3 in favor of putting an end to judicial punishments that give offenders no hope of a life after prison. Even Chief Justice John Roberts, a notorious conservative appointed by President George W. Bush, ruled on the side of what's fair and decent.

At the heart of the decision was the case of Terrance Graham who, at 17, was already on parole when he broke into a home and robbed the owners by gunpoint. To be fair, it seems that Graham, now in his early 20s, didn't learn from his first crime and stint in jail. However, a life sentence without the possibility of pa-

was unjust and, though it was legally acceptable, decided to go another route.

With their ruling, the Court does not excuse the Graham's of the world. Rather, it asks that judges act fairly – and humanely - when handing down sentences. This decision is a step toward fair sentencing practices that could give offenders, with the aid of rehabilitation, hope of a life after prison. Since America incarcerates more people than any other country in the world, this is a step our country needed to take.

Greg Mathis is a retired Michigan District Court Judge and syndicated television judge.

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