



# POINT REYES LIGHT

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OPINION

## Unseen and unheard no more

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by **Rhea Suh**  
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At Marin Community Foundation, we recently completed our first strategic planning process. That process delivered a lot of the things I expected, and one thing I didn't. Our purpose. The reason we exist. And that purpose begins and ends with community. Building it, recognizing the power in it, and then mobilizing it.

I fundamentally believe community is not one thing; it's everything. It's where pain happens and where healing starts. It's where advocacy at the most local level changes things on the most tangible level, and where these actions result in the nurturing of leadership and leaders. It's where the dreams of opportunity are nurtured or crushed.

The ability for communities to not just function, but flourish, is critical to the dream of democracy, of opportunity and of freedom.

So it struck me as particularly apropos that last week, attending an event at the Dance Palace in Point Reyes Station, I was keenly brought back to this purpose. The event was put on to announce the release of a major report, titled "Growing Together: Advancing Housing Solutions for Workers in West Marin," to an audience of

committed community members. The report is the culmination of more than a year's worth of in-depth research conducted in the community.

The result delivers a deep and often painful account of the inhumane living conditions that many West Marin workers—particularly agricultural workers—and their families endure. Mold and mildew, leaks, vermin, a lack of plumbing, unpleasant smells, and dirty drinking water are just some of those conditions. Along with widespread overcrowding and skyrocketing rents. Many housing structures are in such bad shape that they are deemed unfit for human occupancy and their occupants are now included in the county's homelessness count.

Hearing these stories from the workers themselves had the room confronting a lot of emotions, and it had me again mulling the concept of community. We are one of the wealthiest, healthiest, best educated counties in California. Likely in the entire country. And we should celebrate that. But we are also one of the most segregated. We should take a moment to examine that.

How can this housing crisis—and it is a crisis—be taking place in our county? Why do we let this happen to our neighbors, to the folks who work tirelessly to create a bounty of local produce and who make West Marin such a special place? How can we celebrate anything if there are folks in our community who are suffering?

I refuse to believe we don't care. This county is generous and progressive. So I have to believe it's one of two factors: We don't know it's happening, or we don't know how to begin solving it.

The beauty of the housing report is that it addresses both factors. Go to [www.wmhousingsolutions.org](http://www.wmhousingsolutions.org) and read it. Hear the stories of hundreds of West Marin workers. It's powerful and undeniable.

Then read the concrete steps that move us toward a better future for us all. There are many things that the county, ranch owners, village associations, not-for-profit groups and residents can undertake, including:

- Developing interim housing solutions for those who are most at risk of eviction or displacement and/or who are living in substandard housing.
- Supporting the county in making policy and process reforms that will enable more housing to be rehabilitated and built in a more cost-effective and timely manner.
- Supporting innovative pilot projects, such as a lease-to-locals program that encourages homeowners to provide rental housing to local workers or co-operative home ownership opportunities.
- Investing in the capacity of the Latino community to advocate for their rights and well-being.

This is where community comes in, because none of these steps is easy. They all demand the attention and action of those of us who are fortunate to call this county home to allow everyone to feel equally as fortunate. M.C.F. is certainly committed to take it on, as are the county and other nonprofits in the community. But we need more money. We need more people. We need more hearts and minds.

Since many of these actions take time, what can we do right now? For those of you reading this who live in Marin, or who love Marin, for those who want to live in a county and in a community that cares for and checks in on our neighbors, check out some actionable steps at [www.wmhousingsolutions.org](http://www.wmhousingsolutions.org). They include attending upcoming Marin County Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors hearings to advocate for affordable housing, and attending a local community gathering to discuss the study. These gatherings are coming to Point Reyes Station and Bolinas.

You can also donate to West Marin Fund's Housing Action Fund.

M.C.F.'s new vision reads as follows: A world where every choice begins with we; where every action sustains all; where every person acts now. We chose those words because we believe we can achieve those words. Marin can be the brightest, fullest example of a community that cares for its neighbors. All of its neighbors. And right now is a great time to start. So let's start.

*Rhea Suh is the president and C.E.O. of Marin Community Foundation.*

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