

## New Market: Making Housing Affordable for People With Disabilities

By Eric Hinton

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Charles Hammerman, president and CEO of [The Disability Opportunity Fund \(TDOF\)](#), doesn't want this story to be about him. The focus, he says, should be on the roundtables his organization recently held in Chicago, San Francisco and New York about burgeoning financing opportunities in affordable housing for people with disabilities. Representatives from investment firms, banks, federal, state and local government agencies and service organizations participated in the roundtables.

But it's difficult to ignore the individual efforts that have led Hammerman's organization to this point. Greater still, it's impossible to dismiss the life story that's led him along this remarkable journey.

Consider it was Hammerman's uncle, Burton Blatt, who was responsible for the groundbreaking photographic essay in 1966 [Christmas in Purgatory](#), which revealed the horrific living conditions in mental institutions across the country at the time.

But closer to home, Hammerman's life was forever changed shortly after his daughter Stephanie was born 18 years ago.

"When Stephanie and [her twin brother] Jonathan were 8 days old, she was fine...In fact, he was the one that wasn't doing well. They were born 2 and a half months premature. After eight days, she developed cysts on the brain and her weight dropped to 1 pound, 15 ounces," Hammerman recalls. "The nurses were crying. We were told that she wouldn't make it through the night."

Stephanie was placed in an incubator and ate only with the assistance of a feeding tube, when Hammerman says he made a difficult decision. "My thought was if she's going to die, take her out of the incubator. Give her to me and if she's going to die, let her die in her father's arms." But hours passed and Stephanie hung on. "The nurses said they had no idea what was keeping her alive."

Now, 18 years later, Stephanie, who has a mild form of cerebral palsy, is on her way to college. Hammerman considers his daughter, one of his seven children, an inspiration to take up this cause.

"We like to consider ourselves philanthropists. But would I be focused on this issue...like this...if it wasn't for her? No way," he says.

According to market research commissioned by the TDOF, 94 percent of those surveyed said there is insufficient affordable housing for [people with disabilities](#); less than 10 percent of people

with cognitive disabilities in the United States own their own home; and, as of 2004, there were more than 267,000 Americans with disabilities improperly housed in nursing homes.

Housing developers, says the TDOF, cite lack of capital as the largest barrier to developing more affordable housing for people with disabilities. Seventy-four percent of developers estimate their capital needs at more than \$500,000 to develop affordable housing for people with disabilities over the next 12 months.

Where others found reason for doom and gloom, Hammerman saw a market opportunity.

A former assistant U.S. attorney in New York, Hammerman founded the Burton Blatt Institute (BBI) at Syracuse University, which is dedicated to advancing civic, economic and social participation of people with disabilities in society. His corporate career included a stint as a senior member of Private Executive Services, a division of Merrill Lynch's Global Private Client Group. (Merrill Lynch & Co. is No. 7 on the [2008 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity® list](#).) He also spent four years with Merrill Lynch's Equity Capital markets division and four years in the Office of the General Counsel. While at Merrill, Hammerman spearheaded the creation of the organization's Disability Awareness Professional Network, an employee resource group. He was also a member of the company's Diversity Advisory Committee to management, which represented employees and their families with disabilities.

Hammerman went to Citibank, No. 45 on the Top 50, with a proposal for a simple idea that had never been done -- to create the first investors fund aimed at the disability community. "I wanted to take my Wall Street experience and create this fund that would only invest in projects or businesses for people with disabilities or businesses doing something for people with disabilities and they loved the whole idea."

Indeed, Hammerman says he was genuinely surprised to discover such a fund didn't already exist when he first proposed the idea.

"It's a market. It's a market that needs to be addressed. It's a market where you can make money," he says. "We're trying to take the word disability and put it in the mainstream. Even if you are developmentally disabled...can't handle your own finances and can't handle your own housing, you're still a person," says Hammerman. "Even if you're assisted by family members you shouldn't be chattel."

That idea was one of the main topics at the recent Wall Street roundtable. Among the attendees were Mark Pinsky, president and CEO of Opportunity Finance Network, and Sue Swenson, former commissioner of the Administration on Developmental Disabilities at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, who spoke poignantly of her son Charlie, who was diagnosed with a disability 25 years ago. The conferences enabled attendees to better understand the potential for Community Reinvestment Act eligibility, new financial product development, the need for an increased supply in housing and how to better direct existing government funding for this housing.

"They're running out of markets and they're looking for new markets. People with disabilities are that new market. But who's going to wake up? Who's going to be smart enough to wake up?" Hammerman asks. "We know that these issues exist. The question is how do we start formulating the discussion? But beyond that talk is cheap. It's time for action."