



Meet Mutual Housing's CEO



Rachel Iskow is CEO of Mutual Housing California.

Rachel Iskow, the resourceful and personable CEO of Mutual Housing California – a nonprofit that operates 18 affordable-housing communities – says that her surname is “a made-up one.” Her Romanian grandfather was Irving Iskowitz but when he came to America, anti-Semitism “was pretty rampant” in a variety of trades in New York City. “So he became Charlie Iskow,” she says, “though my grandmother always called him ‘Oiv.’”

Iskow develops Mutual Housing’s communities, which in turn require residents to take leadership roles in governing their own future. She says she was inspired by her mother, Eva Iskow, a longtime neighborhood activist in the mostly working-class Bay Area city of Fremont.

“My earliest involvement in the grassroots movement was registering people by (political) party, which was how you did it in those days,” she recalls. “My mom would go up one side of the street and I’d go up the other side, with our clipboards. I remember Janis Ian doing face-painting at some of the rallies and not realizing how famous she was.” (Ian, a celebrated singer-songwriter, burst onto the folk-music scene in 1975 with her Grammy Award-winning song, “At Seventeen.”)

Iskow slightly squints her pale gray-blue eyes, as though she’s watching an old home-movie, and says, “I was, like, 8.”

In the years that followed, Iskow traveled a nonprofit career path. She became executive director of W.O.M.A.N., Incorporated, in San Francisco (the acronym stands for Women Organized to Make Abuse Nonexistent), and earned her masters degree in urban planning at UCLA.

Mutual Housing California, which was formed in 1988 and which she’s been with for almost 20 years, develops communities with onsite social services for formerly homeless people who now work in low-paying but essential jobs (think waiting on tables, mowing lawns, housekeeping and janitorial jobs). Veterans and children comprise a special focus of the organization.

On Iskow’s watch, Mutual Housing has grown from four affordable-housing communities to 18. Tomorrow, which happens to be her 55th birthday, she makes it clear she’s only just begun. Please drop by.

“People think that if you work with low-income people you’re trying to ‘fix’ them,” Rachel Iskow is telling me as we sit in the conference room of one of Mutual Housing California’s communities, in the Lemon Hill area of

Mutual Housing California develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development. For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at mutualhousing.com.

southeast Sacramento. “We don’t see it that way. We see it as helping them discover what they can contribute to society. We try to help them get there. But we don’t fix them.”

The 4.74-acre community where I’m visiting Iskow features one-, two-, three- and even four-bedroom apartments and “at least five languages,” she says (Chinese, Hmong, Vietnamese, Spanish and English). There are ample living quarters for physically disabled tenants. The building exteriors are painted in cinnamon and mustard tones, understated but far-from-institutional color choices. The grounds are immaculately kept and there’s an ongoing effort, with flora and construction materials, to bring all of the Mutual Housing communities into “green” mode. Its Davis development incorporates photovoltaic energy.

“One of my goals at Lemon Hill is to secure free Internet access in the next couple of months,” says Iskow, the nonprofit’s CEO.

Mutual Housing California, which merged with the Yolo Housing Association not long ago, receives funding from a variety of sources. “We rely on charitable grants,” Iskow says, “and as you can imagine, a lot of those dried up during the recession. Banks used to provide a great deal of assistance but their giving started to fluctuate, too. Bond and redevelopment funds have disappeared.”

On a cheerier note, a bill now before the state legislature, Senate Bill 391 – the California Homes and Jobs Act of 2013 – would create a permanent source of funding for affordable housing by tacking a \$75 fee onto real estate transaction recording documents. It could mean the release of billions of dollars to the cause, Iskow says.

By choice, Iskow is a single mom with two children she adopted out of the Sacramento County foster system when they were toddlers: Yasmina, who’s now 14, and Alejandra, who’s 10. When I ask her, half-seriously, what she does in her free time, she surprises me. Her eyes grow wide and her gestures more expansive. “Two years ago, I actually developed a hobby!” she announces, as though the news surprised even her. She’s seriously into planting and growing succulents and cacti – and you instantly realize it makes perfect sense for someone who’s committed to sustainable communities and families to bring that same fervor to sustainable landscaping.

“Our properties run on very low margins,” she says, “and as water costs spiral upward, so do our operating costs.” So maybe the succulents and cacti aren’t that much of a hobby. Or maybe, for this woman doing good work is the most rewarding hobby of all.

Founded in 1988, Mutual Housing California develops and operates well-designed rental housing for the diversity of the region’s households. The 18 communities in Sacramento and Yolo counties have 3,000 residents, nearly half of whom are children.