HAND Holds the Region’s Feet to the Fire on Housing Crisis

On June 11, 2019, the region’s “housers” – real estate and community development professionals - gathered in Washington, DC for HAND’s 28th Annual Meeting & Housing Expo. Founded in 1991, HAND convenes these practitioners throughout the year for training and seminars designed to strengthen their organization’s ability to create and preserve affordable housing within the Capital Region of Baltimore, Washington and Richmond. The Annual Meeting is the culminating program on the calendar, held each June. This year’s festivities welcomed a bevy of local elected officials from across the region and leaders from the business, nonprofit, healthcare and philanthropic communities – all who discussed how they are taking an innovative approach to address the region’s housing crisis.

Themed “Holding Ourselves Accountable: Bold Housing Solutions for Every Sector & Every Jurisdiction,” the organization sought to explore how we all play a role in responding to the growing housing affordability challenge – whether you represent a university, municipality, large corporation, real estate developer, foundation, community organization or a small business. The Plenary kicked the day off with a robust discussion featuring several elected officials who are taking the crisis head on in their own jurisdictions: Christian Dorsey (Chair, Arlington County Board), Marc Elrich (County Executive, Montgomery County, MD), Phyllis Randall (Chair, Loudoun County Board of Supervisors) and Robert C. White, Jr.
(Councilmember, District of Columbia Council). Moderated by Robin Hamilton (Founder, Around Robin Production Company), the session allowed for each official to update attendees on what their specific jurisdictions are doing to take on the need for affordable housing. From Arlington’s engagement with Amazon to Loudoun County’s need for cross-sector partnerships, the dialogue presented a unique opportunity for practitioners and elected officials alike to get a sense of the region’s temperature on this issue, and also learn from each other in the process.

Local Afro-Brazilian drum ensemble Batalá Washington opened the Awards luncheon with its compelling rhythms, setting the tone for the dynamic program and a bold announcement from HAND: the Housing Indicator Tool, a Scorecard for Measuring the Region’s Progress Towards Meeting Housing Needs (HIT).

“The time is now to make affordable housing a reality for each resident within our reach, and that will require us to look at it through a new lens of boldness. We must ask ourselves what we can do to make a tangible impact for our most vulnerable neighbors, and then hold each other accountable to follow through. HAND’s Housing Indicator Tool will be instrumental in making sure that these conversations are followed by action,” said Heather Raspberry, HAND’s Executive Director.

Conference attendees were the first to hear details on the tool, set to be released annually beginning in February 2020. HIT will provide the most up-to-date local data on housing production, as well as a high-level evaluation of the effectiveness of local programs and policies that address housing affordability and racial inequities. HAND will work closely with Alexandria-based LSA on its launch and subsequent updates.

“Making effective progress on housing affordability within the Capital Region is very possible, but we must first have a strong grasp of where we currently stand, and what gaps we must fill. The Housing Indicator Tool will lay this data out in a comprehensive manner that is easy to digest, and most importantly holding us accountable for the way forward,” said Lisa Sturtevant, President and Founder of LSA.
The luncheon’s Fireside Chat rounded off the agenda, featuring usual and not-so-usual suspects across industry sectors: **AJ Jackson** (Executive Vice President, Social Impact Investing, JBG SMITH), **Celeste James** (Executive Director, Community Health, Kaiser Permanente), **Jim Knight** (Executive Director & President, Jubilee Housing) and **Bruce McNamer** (President & CEO, Greater Washington Community Foundation). Each speaker represented a participating organization in the Capital Region Housing Challenge - the regional effort (launched by the Housing Leaders Group of Greater Washington) to catalyze $1 billion to accelerate greater housing affordability in the Capital Region. Each organization brings a different approach to the table, but collectively the impact can be remarkable – whether it’s the Justice Housing Partners Fund created by Jubilee Housing or JBG SMITH’s Washington Housing Initiative, designed to create and preserve workforce housing for thousands of individuals over the next decade.

Five individuals and organizations were honored via the Housing Achievement Awards for their outstanding work and leadership, including the likes of **Tamara Copeland** (formerly of the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers), who has led the charge on racial equity within the local philanthropic community and **Mission First Housing Group** – the real estate developer behind **Plaza West**, a residential community that caters specifically to ‘grandfamilies,’ or children being raised exclusively by their grandparents - an increasingly prevalent family dynamic within the region. Notably, 12-year old Milen Abrah, the Children’s Art Contest winner (and living with her own grandfamily), gave pause to the audience with her powerful remarks about teamwork. Her winning masterpiece portrayed her interpretation of “Working Together as One,” and in her own way, reinforced the concept echoed throughout the day: housing affordability is a regional, cross-sector issue that requires intentional effort from all sides.

The elected officials and other speakers made it clear that the tools and resources exist, so responding to the housing crisis in a meaningful way is a matter of garnering the will to do so. As Fireside Chat Moderator David Bowers (Vice President, Enterprise) said, “the serious housing affordability challenges in our region weren’t created overnight. They certainly won’t be eliminated overnight either, but we know there is great power in coordinated collective action.”