



40th Anniversary Stories

HCA's Early First Time Homebuyer Program

In the late 1980s, when we last left the fledgling Housing Corporation of Arlington organization, it had suffered a major defeat. HCA's initial big plan – to acquire homes that the Town had taken for tax title, move them to a vacant Town-owned lot on Lake Street, and sell them at affordable prices to low-income first time homebuyers was resoundingly struck down by Town Meeting.

But our fearless founders did not give up!

They kept their attention on their goal: to help low-income families stay in Arlington, and to create affordable homes that would be a community asset for years to come.

Their next effort was successful! They were able to find other properties and help local families acquire their first homes affordably.

In early 1990, HCA identified two homes that had been foreclosed on in Arlington: a 2-family home on Warren Street, and a single family home on Teel Street. The homes were under the jurisdiction of the Select Board due to the significant amount of back taxes owed to the Town.

By early May of 1990, HCA had formed a plan to renovate the homes and sell each unit (3 homes total) to first time homebuyers with household annual incomes between \$35,000 and \$43,000. The buyers had to be residents of Arlington or Town employees. The homes would be priced at or below \$130,000 (vs. the market rate of \$200,000). HCA would provide subsidies to the buyers, enabling them to get a lower interest rate on a mortgage, which would enable them to take out a larger mortgage that was still affordable to them. If the buyers sold their homes in the future, the subsidy funds would be owed back to HCA to enable more affordable housing at that time.

It would be a win for (almost) all. There was one family renting one of the units, who HCA would need to help relocate. But three other local families would get to purchase their first home, the town would receive payment for all back taxes owed from the sale of the properties to those owners, and HCA would start to have an impact in stemming the loss of families from Arlington due to the high cost of housing.



Ad that ran multiple times in Your Arlington, spring 1990

In spring of 1990 HCA started actively collecting applications from hopeful households. In late April, they held a public information session. The local paper described the event as “standing room only” as an estimated 120 people crowded into the Senior Center on Maple Street to learn more! Select Board Member Stephen Gilligan welcomed the attendees. HCA’s President Wilson Henderson, and many other HCA members and others, including Bob Bowes, who is still active and supportive of affordable housing in Arlington today, shared information about a subsidized mortgage program available for first time homebuyers, how a condominium structure works when there are two units and unit owners in one building and other factors to consider when buying a home.

On May 10, 1990, HCA held a lottery to randomly select the families who would be able to purchase Arlington’s first private affordable housing units.

By November 1990 two families had closed on the acquisition of their homes and were moving in on Warren Street! By March 1991 a family had purchased and was moving into their new home on Teel Street! The families included a single mom nurse with two kids, a couple with one child, and a couple with two children.

This initial program was the result of significant effort by so many people, including pushing through significant opposition to affordable housing. A Letter to the Editor in the Arlington Advocate from April 1990 noted that it was problematic that the town was losing affordable housing to condo conversions and redevelopment projects, but also that, “One works hard, saves money, and finds a home within one’s means. Affordable housing proposals should not be an end run around hard work and saving.” We can assume this writer never had to support a family solely from the income of a full-time minimum wage job...

HCA’s efforts — though not yet widely supported — likely helped to turn the tide in opinion about affordable housing, while also helping a small number of local families.

By the mid 1990s HCA was regularly receiving awards of Community Development Block Grant funds from the Town of Arlington for affordable housing programs.

In 1994 the local paper ran a story about the winners of the Arlington fair housing essay contest, held at Arlington High School – and published the five winning essays. The winners spoke to the importance of fair housing in the context of preventing bigotry or discrimination but also about the importance of socio-economic diversity. They spoke of ensuring that single parents, low-income families or people with disabilities could fairly access an affordable home of their own.

Important shifts in public opinion and policy never happen overnight. Those who care must keep working towards the goal. It likely would have been hard for those early HCA leaders to imagine that — a few decades later — HCA would have a portfolio of 208 units with a beautiful 43-unit building under construction on Sunnyside Ave, and a zoning approval for yet 40 more units near Arlington Center. But those early advocates set the stage that enabled the rest of the work.