



Housing
Corporation
of Arlington

40th Anniversary Stories

Story 6: HCA Is part of a Movement

By now you know that HCA was founded in 1986 by Arlington residents, after a town Task Force found that we needed a group like this to address the housing crisis.

But you may not know that those residents were not working in a vacuum. There are organizations like HCA — called community development corporations (CDCs) — across Massachusetts and across the United States. One thing that's special about working at a CDC in Massachusetts is that a key policy that spurred the start of the CDC movement grew out of the efforts of Robert F. Kennedy, who, like his brother and US President John F. Kennedy, was born in Brookline and spent college and the earlier years of his career in Massachusetts.

As US Attorney General under President Johnson, Robert F. Kennedy strongly advocated for passage of Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964. The EOA, along with a 1966 amendment called the Special Impact Program which allowed federal funding of community development projects in poor urban areas, was the key legislation resulting in the creation of CDCs. Kennedy himself helped to draft the plan that led to what is believed to be the very first CDC — in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of New York City. Many other urban CDCs were formed around the same time, including in Boston.

The growing activism against racism, sexism, war, and other issues in the 1960's and 1970's helped many people see that regular citizens could have big impact. Also during this time, racist laws and beliefs were continuing to create greater segregation, and also were leading to less investment in public housing, or in creating public housing in very isolated and undesirable parts of cities. Residents started wondering if they couldn't build affordable housing that was more locally controlled. But what ultimately motivated many regular citizens to act were large "urban renewal" plans that would intentionally displace or demolish long standing low-income neighborhoods in order to build something new. Residents banded together to fight for alternate plans that would reflect what the people living in those areas actually wanted and needed for their own neighborhoods.

The first CDCs in our area, such as Madison Park Development Corporation in Roxbury, Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion (IBA) in the South End, and Lena Park CDC in Dorchester and Mattapan, were founded in the 1960's in Boston neighborhoods where urban renewal plans were emerging.

In the 1970's — in part spurred by the thoughtful and dogged efforts of the late activist and legislator, Mel King — the Commonwealth of Massachusetts established several new funding programs to support its fledgling nonprofit affordable housing development field, including funding agencies that remain essential today for the housing that HCA builds, like CEDAC (Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation).

Nationally, there were about 200 CDCs across the state in 1970. But by 1988 that figure had grown to nearly 2,000...including HCA, which was founded in 1986! We were part of that next wave of new CDCs formed in the 1980's, many of which were formed in urban areas just outside of major cities. Brookline CDC (then called Brookline Improvement Coalition) was formed in 1983 and WATCH CDC in Waltham was founded in 1988. HCA was in very good company!

So what is a CDC exactly?

CDCs are nonprofit organizations most commonly formed to serve a specific geographic area, but sometimes they focus on supporting a defined community, like immigrants from a certain region of the world. They overwhelmingly focus on creating and sustaining affordable housing, but may also respond to the other needs and desires of the community they serve, such as for adult education, food access, youth programming, job training, healthcare, or other social programs. CDCs are inherently community-led. Many CDCs, although not all, lead community organizing efforts with members of their community in order to make policy changes or see other improvements for issues they work on.

In Massachusetts, state law defines what a CDC is. Organizations that qualify under the state definition are eligible to receive the Community Investment Tax Credits that HCA secures annually.

Our region has many incredible and special nonprofits. What makes CDC so special (it may be argued!) is our connection to community, our ability to carry out a complex effort like real estate development while staying true to our nonprofit mission and values, our ability to be nimble and respond to emerging needs in our community, and our intention and skill in helping to develop new leaders from among populations who are directly impacted by the issues we address — we inherently create leaders from demographic groups that our wider society often assumes cannot or will not lead.

By being a part of the HCA community, you are a part of this special movement! You are connected to a nation-wide network of dedicated residents who invest in their local CDC in order to build a vision of their community that is more affordable, welcoming, and supportive for all. Thank you!

This story references data found in:

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What is a Community Development Corporation by Rachel Arakeini of NACEDA Sept 17, 2014