Housing Corporation of Arlington

40th Anniversary Stories

Story 11: Community Organizing at HCA

Anyone who is familiar with HCA knows that we create and own affordable housing.

Most people also know that we provide direct social services – like our Homelessness Prevention Program – to help local families remain stable and housed.

But fewer folks know that HCA carries out community organizing in order to help our own tenants and other local residents become skilled housing leaders who take action to advance affordable housing. As we look back and forward to celebrate HCA's 40th anniversary in 2026, let's look at how this program has evolved!

As you may recall from an earlier story this year, the community development movement in the United States started in the 1960's when residents of communities facing destructive forces banded together to take control over housing and development issues in their neighborhoods. They organized for access to home financing, against redlining, and against urban renewal. From those early efforts — initially largely in New York and Boston — the community development field that HCA is part of was born.

HCA was founded a couple decades later, in 1986, during an era when great strides were being made in creating the financing and technical assistance infrastructure that would power the work of community development corporations across the country. HCA formed during a time when many ex-urban or suburban communities that were once affordable, like Arlington, were now also starting to experience the destabilizing consequences of an out of control housing market.

So community organizing has always been in the DNA of our community development movement. And from HCA's earliest days in 1986 through to today, HCA has always been a grassroots, community-driven organization. But over the last few years, we have expanded what that means. Today, our goal is to build a wide base of people — both tenants and homeowners, of all incomes — who not only share the goal of a more affordable Arlington, and but who also collectively take action to make change.

Of course, you cannot sustainably or effectively solve a problem if the people directly impacted don't have a say in crafting the solutions. So as HCA builds this broad based of residents, we are also creating opportunities for HCA tenants and other low-income families in Arlington — people who know first-hand how destructive this housing crisis can be — to become leaders who can influence and strengthen HCA, and influence housing issues in the wider community.

One way we do this is through the HCA Tenant Council. The Tenant Council was formed in 2023 by HCA tenants who identified four broad goals for the group: 1) increase communication between tenants and create a culture that helps build community; 2) address problems and issues so life in HCA's homes can be better; 3) create a safe, family-friendly space for tenants to find resources and opportunities to volunteer; and 4) expand and grow the voice for tenants at HCA and in Arlington.

Through formal training and direct experience, HCA tenants, including those on the Steering Committee that facilitates the Tenant Council, are gaining knowledge and skills in public speaking, meeting facilitation, community outreach, organizational structure, collective decision making, and more.

To date, the Tenant Council has developed and secured several improvements to HCA's property management policies that have improved tenant quality of life and helped property operations run more smoothly. The Council has also taken a lead in planning the annual tenant summer bash for HCA tenants. They are now working on a proposal that the Tenant Council and the HCA Board are expected finalize and adopt in 2027 that will require solicitation of a Tenant Council recommendation before key HCA decisions are made in areas such as changes to property budgets, new affordable housing projects, and HCA's endorsement of local or state policies.

Outside of the Tenant Council, HCA also provides opportunities for anyone in Arlington to take action on housing. Members of our real estate committee make recommendations to the Board about new housing projects – and it's always open to new members! Many HCA tenants and other Arlington residents wrote letters or attended the zoning hearings for our Emma's Court project to demonstrate broad support for the project to the Redevelopment Board. HCA members have also signed petitions at our Walk for Affordable Housing in support of housing related state legislation, or joined HCA at an annual community development lobby day, to talk directly with our state legislators about important bills.

Like any new program, this work is evolving. In the coming year, you can expect to see more opportunities to take actions such as calling an elected official, signing a petition, sending an email, speaking at a public meeting, or attending an event to help advance a policy, program, or project that will help to make Arlington more affordable for all.

HCA tenants are committed to being engaged to make change. As Tenant Council Steering Committee Member, Bailey Sheppard says, “I’m proud that we’ve fostered this new space [of the Tenant Council] where everyone feels heard and gets to be part of the conversation.” And to reinforce a core point of this work, fellow Steering Committee Member and HCA Board member, Mike Mango notes, “We need tenants to bring their voice to conversations about housing, because the best people to advocate for policy are those who those policies affect.”

But no one can go it alone. The Tenant Council wants support from the wider HCA community — and HCA’s homeowner members have a strong history of advocating for affordable housing. Today, HCA brings together everyone who cares about affordability, equity, and a diverse and vibrant Arlington to do what they can for that mission. We look forward to working with you as opportunities for action emerge!