

LIVE UNITED



United Way of Rhode Island

Housing For All Summit
**CREATIVE COMMUNITY
CONVERSATION**

March 14, 2016



“How can we ensure that all Rhode Islanders have access to housing that is safe, healthy, and affordable?”

United Way of Rhode Island issued this pressing call to action in early 2016. Nearly 300 people from across the state took up the charge, gathering at the *Housing for All Summit* on March 14 to generate fresh approaches to the issues surrounding housing affordability in our state. The *Housing for All Summit* attracted participants with a wide range of lived experiences and expertise, including representatives from housing and community development non-profits, elected officials, health care professionals, members of the business community, educators and their students. When asked whether they or someone they knew was impacted by high housing costs in our state, 74% of participants answered affirmatively, demonstrating the wide reach of this issue. Attendees were geographically diverse, as well, with participants representing all 28 municipalities in Rhode Island.

EVENT OVERVIEW

United Way of RI convened the Housing for All Summit to infuse conversations around housing policies and practices with fresh perspectives and a collaborative spirit. They invited DownCity Design, a non-profit design organization dedicated to helping people design solutions for their communities, to create the *Creative Community Conversation*, a series of dynamic activities that guided participants through the process of generating innovative responses to the challenges that prevent all Rhode Islanders from accessing the housing they need. DownCity Design structured the event as a lively design challenge, using a framework for problem-solving that helped participants better understand the full complexity of the issues and imagine creative solutions.



In order to demystify the complex issues surrounding housing affordability in our state, United Way of RI created a number of ways to share information and ideas throughout the Housing for All Summit. An informative video produced by United Way wove together first-person narratives with infographics that highlighted larger trends. An inspiring presentation by Dr. Megan Sandel, Principal Investigator with Children’s HealthWatch, helped attendees gain a clearer understanding of the resonant impacts of poor housing conditions on health and education. Elizabeth Falcon from the Coalition for Nonprofit Housing and Economic Development (CNHED) in Washington, D.C., discussed her organization’s efforts to creatively advocate for housing reform in our nation’s capital. And a program brochure loaded with infographics and key data points proved a useful resource for participants as they built a shared understanding of the issues at hand.

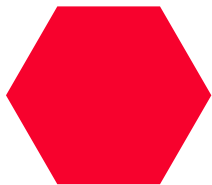
PHASE 1: ISSUE MAPPING

Housing affordability is a particularly complex problem, with roots in many other deeply entrenched societal issues. The first step of our Creative Community Conversation was to map the issues that prevent Rhode Islanders from accessing quality housing they can afford, so that we could better understand the landscape of this complex issue.

It can be daunting to come up with specific solutions for an abstract challenge, so we grounded the conversation in the stories of real Rhode Islanders struggling to access housing for themselves and their families. Each table was given one of four narratives describing the specific challenges of that family, while also linking those challenges to larger trends in RI, informed by data from sources like the HousingWorks RI Factbook, RI Kids Count, and the Economic Progress Institute.

After reading and discussing the family narrative they'd been given, each table used a kit of colorful geometric shapes to create a map of the issues impacting that family, right on the tabletop. The groups started by identifying barriers—the direct challenges preventing that family from accessing safe, healthy, affordable housing—represented here by red hexagons. Next, they thought about the root causes that contribute to those barriers—the deeper, more systemic issues—and recorded them on orange squares that linked to the barriers. These often went several layers deep, with orange squares linked to one another, as the group peeled back the root causes of each root cause. Finally, the group proposed the emerging needs suggested by these barriers and root causes.

The maps evolved as the conversations deepened, with pieces constantly in motion as groups investigated the complex relationships between root causes, barriers, and needs.



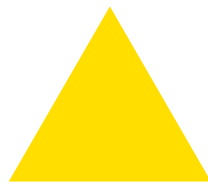
Barriers

What challenges keep this individual from accessing safe, healthy, and affordable housing?



Root Causes

What deeper, more systemic conditions contribute to those barriers?



Emerging Needs

What needs to change in order to remove those barriers?





PHASE 2: STRATEGY SEEKING

After reflecting on the 31 maps around the room and beginning to notice patterns and emerging themes, the groups re-convened to identify sites for intervention and brainstorm new policies, new programs, and new initiatives to help remove barriers and create new opportunities for housing accessibility. We invited participants to focus on positive, forward-thinking strategies that acknowledged the complexity of the issues they had mapped.

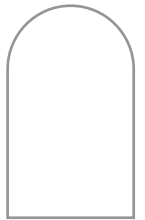
Participants considered strategies at several levels, including *individual* actions, *organizational* choices (encompassing non-profits, community development corporations, and for-profit corporations), and *governmental* policies (including local, municipal, state and national government). Each type of strategy had a corresponding shape, and attendees were invited to write their ideas directly on three-dimensional cards in those shapes and place them at the site on their maps where that intervention would prove most useful.



Individual
What can individuals do?



Organizational
What can non-profits and community based organizations do?



Policy
What can local, state, and/or national government do?





PARTNERSHIPS

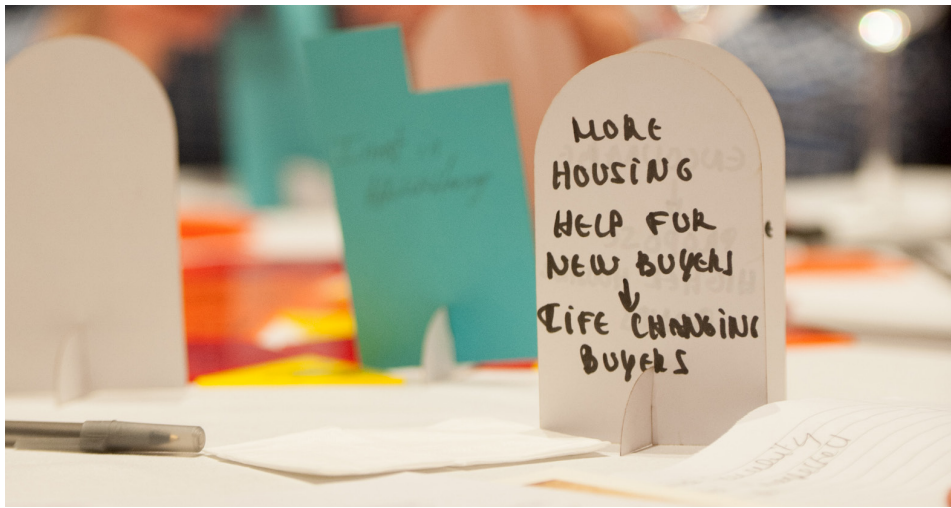
Throughout the Housing for All Summit, participants made reference to the wide variety of factors that impact access to housing. Inequities and challenges around education, health care, and workforce participation arose frequently in the conversations around the room and in the issue maps at each table. The barriers to housing affordability are complex, and potential sites of intervention permeate our socio-economic and political systems. It is not surprising, then, that many of the strategies that emerged reflected the need for partnership between sectors and for solutions that addressed multiple systems at once.

In addition to new partnerships that could expand the range of services provided by organizations, there were numerous suggestions involving collaboration to cross-promote existing programs, including the creation or expansion of coalitions or intermediaries that could coordinate delivery of services and help organizations communicate and share resources.

ANALYSIS

Participants in the Housing for All Summit generated a staggering 568 strategies for helping more Rhode Islanders gain access to safe, healthy, affordable housing during the Creative Community Conversation. To analyze this impressive data set, DownCity Design began by photographing and transcribing every strategy card on the 31 participating tables, and documenting their connection to the intricate maps of challenges the tables had created. We assigned multiple tags to each of the strategies using a set of 36 frequently referenced themes like housing, education, community collaboration, social services, and political engagement, and built a database that enabled us to identify the patterns and trending topics that emerged from each table's insightful conversations. The results pointed toward several distinct clusters of interventions that could be further developed to increase access to safe, healthy and affordable housing in our state. Below are descriptions of the most prominent trends revealed through our data analysis.

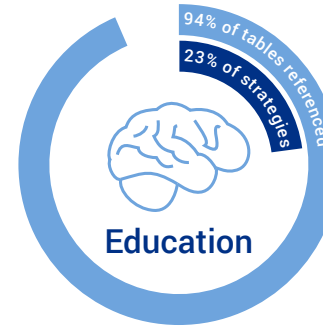




HOUSING

Not surprisingly, every table in the room addressed the topic of housing, and close to 25% of the 568 suggested strategies related directly to housing affordability and housing policy. Many participants focused on destigmatizing affordable housing and encouraging communities around the state to create new housing units. Several tables proposed incentives to organizations or municipalities for the development of new affordable housing units, and focused on the need to consider shifting population trends when determining how those units should be configured. Zoning was another popular topic, with multiple suggestions around zoning reform to increase allowable density in less urban locales, in order to shift concentrations of affordable housing units away from the state's largest cities. It was also proposed that vacant public properties could be repurposed as temporary shelters for people in need of housing.

Our state's aging housing stock emerged as a big concern. In addition to the construction of new units, there were proposals to hold landlords accountable and provide incentives for maintaining healthy homes in good repair, remediate lead paint, and replace aging water pipes to reduce lead exposure through drinking water. The need for regulation and enforcement of existing laws and policies was frequently cited. Several participants also proposed tax credits for property improvements.



EDUCATION

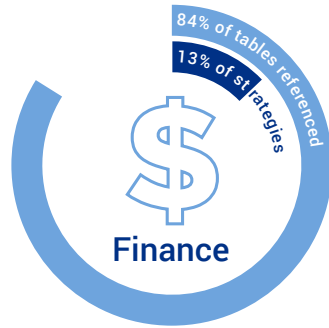
Education was the most widely discussed topic after housing. Over 90% of the participating tables touched on the subject, and participants generated more than 120 strategies related to education. There were clusters of strategies that addressed inequities in our formal K-12 school systems, resulting in citizens who are underprepared to succeed in life beyond school, as well as conversations around barriers to higher education and the negative impact of heavy student loan burdens.

Even more prominent was a belief that education in its most basic form—the sharing of information and skills in both formal and informal settings—is fundamental to tackling social inequity. Many participants referenced the multitude of existing policies and programs designed to assist people struggling to access safe, healthy, affordable housing, and cited a regrettable lack of public awareness or access to these programs. Strategies designed to educate people about the systems in which they live and the resources embedded in those systems were numerous. In addition, there were multiple strategies that addressed the need to raise awareness around housing issues in our state, so that policymakers and indeed the community at large could be better informed and more empathetic.



FINANCIAL LITERACY

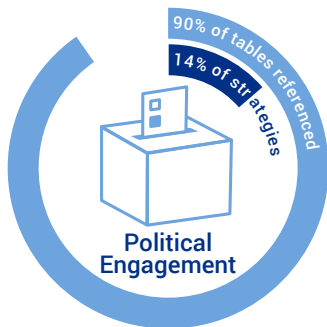
A particularly interesting trend within discussions around education was the need for increased financial literacy. Nearly half of the tables in the room touched on the topic, and it was the fourth most used two-word phrase of the day (after “affordable housing,” “invest in,” and “advocacy for”). Participants in the Creative Community Conversation recognized a need for greater financial literacy at every level: in K-12 schools, in college, and throughout adulthood. Many of the proposed strategies called for the development of financial literacy training programs, workshops and curricula that would empower individuals to take greater control over their personal finances. Some tables proposed the creation of new programs for first-time homebuyers that would prepare them for the financial responsibilities and risks that come with homeownership and provide them with tools and resources to help get secure a home and stay securely in it.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Participants recognized that our state’s struggling economy strongly impacts our residents’ ability to afford quality housing. Conversations about the economy and workforce development were prominent at 84% of the room’s tables. 17 participants proposed raising the minimum wage to better match the cost of living in our state. 48 strategies, meanwhile, focused on strengthening our workforce, including proposals for new training and apprenticeship programs. Many individuals felt that we should foster business growth and development, creating a more “business-friendly” climate in our state to encourage the creation of new businesses and the relocation of existing businesses to RI.

Transportation, child care and health care were strong sub-themes of the topic of workforce development. Several participants suggested that improving our state’s public transportation systems and better connecting affordable housing developments with urban centers might help workers. Others cited the need for on-site, employer-sponsored child care for working families. Finally, multiple attendees discussed the need for more comprehensive and affordable health care coverage, whether provided by employers or by the state or federal government, in order to ensure that costly health issues would not derail otherwise stable families.



POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

There was a strong consensus that a better informed, more engaged electorate could advocate more strongly for safe, healthy and affordable housing for all Rhode Islanders. Many of the strategies within this category focused on individual actions, including voting, educating existing elected officials, and running for office. 89 participants also cited

a desire for less formal acts of engagement, including grassroots community organizing that would empower community members struggling to find affordable housing to come together and seek solutions. Promoting volunteerism and “neighborliness” were also common themes, with suggestions including carpooling and creating ways for neighbors to exchange services like cooking, babysitting and tutoring in order to help their housing dollars extend farther.

Frequently Discussed Topics

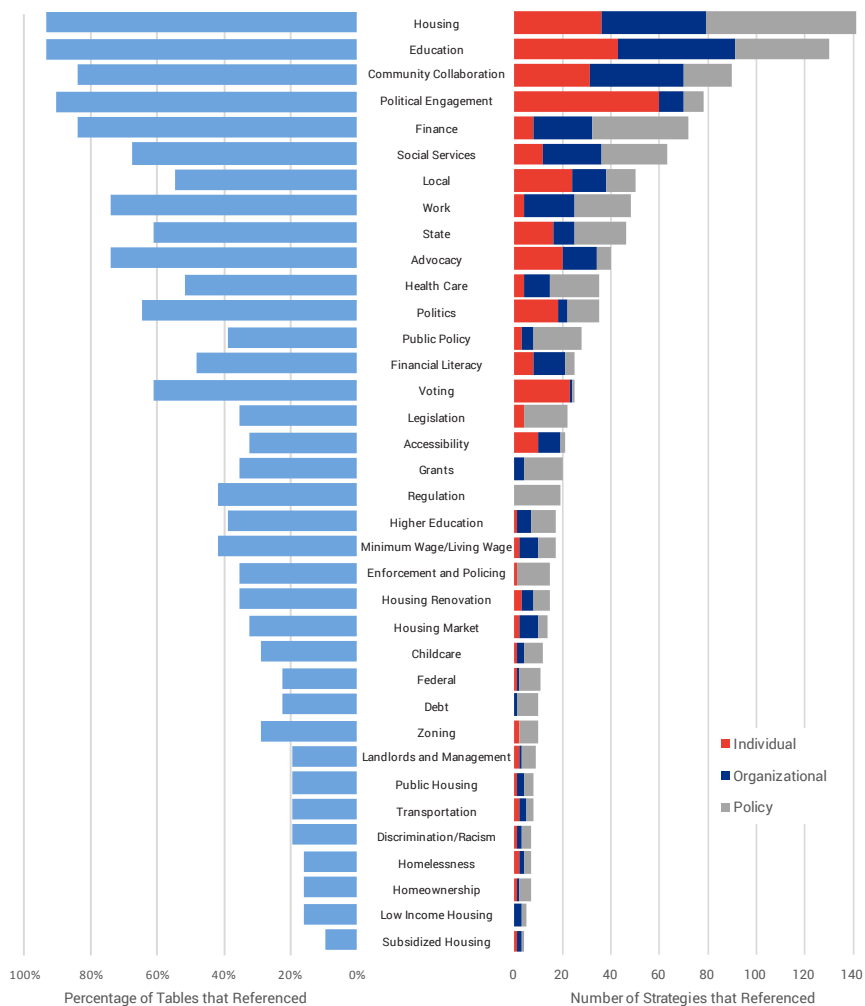


Figure 3 The graph on the left shows the percentage of tables that discussed a given topic. The graph on the right illustrates the number of individual written strategies that referenced each topic and the type of strategy proposed.



NEXT STEPS

The Creative Community Conversation was a highlight of the 2016 Housing for All Summit. Nearly 300 participants brought their energy, experience and creativity to the table, working together to devise hundreds of new approaches to the challenges of housing affordability in Rhode Island. Our hope is that the profound conversations that began over colorful maps at the summit will continue to evolve, and the most promising strategies that were proposed will be developed and deepened.

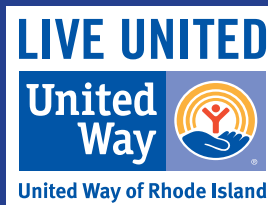
At the conclusion of the Housing for All Summit, United Way of RI announced the creation of a new fund, sponsored in part by Bank of America and National Grid, designed to support the development of promising ideas that will increase access to safer, healthier, more affordable housing for all Rhode Islanders.



The Housing For All Summit
and Report was funded by our
sponsor Bank of America



Facilitation and analysis of
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