

Summary of Topics Discussed at POAH's 15th Anniversary Event



September 28, 2016

Below is a summary of key issues and themes from POAH's 15 Year Anniversary conversation, with presentations from Sarah Rosen Wartell (President, Urban Institute) and Chris Estes (President & CEO, National Housing Conference), and town hall discussion moderated by Reese Fayde (POAH Board Member).

NEED FOR COLLABORATION AND HIGHLIGHTING COMMON CAUSES

Improving access to opportunity requires us to collaborate across sectors – to cast aside a narrow “industry” mindset in favor of a broader movement incorporating the entire spectrum of agencies and actors working to promote healthy, equitable, communities of opportunity. Cross-silo collaboration in an environment of scarcity is challenging, but can improve outcomes across sectors: for instance, better connecting health and housing would allow savings accruing to other sectors to be reinvested in the policies that we know work. Housing is inextricably linked to other systems – like the “hub of a wheel” – and it is important to build alliances with issues, sectors, and lenses that might be more politically visible, particularly in working to bring in the next administration as an advocate and champion for effective community development.

The challenge of productively leveraging political capital makes it all the more important to be able to tell a coherent story and connect organizations united by mission but advocating for various populations or along different points of the housing continuum. To this end, avoiding segmentation – for instance, “workforce” housing vs. “affordable” housing – helps us be better advocates and avoids the creation of new programs that could erode existing ones.

A BALANCED APPROACH TO PROMOTING OPPORTUNITY

It's critical that we promote a balanced approach to economic mobility, inclusive of both geographic mobility and investment in distressed communities. Sarah Rosen Wartell presented a practical framework for “place-conscious structures to support people,” particularly in tailoring strategies to three different kinds of neighborhoods – high-poverty communities, high-opportunity “launch-pads,” and rapidly changing “engines” undergoing gentrification. Successful revitalization and stabilization efforts require extensive collaboration, and are most effective when utilizing existing on-the-ground networks and stakeholders with deep community ties. In developing policies to promote economic mobility, we need to avoid framing as a zero-sum game of winners and losers and continue to advocate for policies that promote stability, dignity, and quality of life for low-income Americans.

ROLE FOR ADVOCACY AROUND SPECIFIC POLICY AGENDA ITEMS

A number of policy and program initiatives deserve our critical feedback, attention, and support – and it is particularly important to advocate for tax and housing finance reform in the current climate of economic growth and stability. This policy agenda includes expanding and adapting LIHTC (both increasing much-needed resources and allowing greater flexibility with deeper targeting through income averaging and other mechanisms), improving mobility in voucher programs, effectively deploying the National Housing Trust Fund, and more. The process of implementing HUD's Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule will continue to shape the conversation around mobility and both racial and economic segregation.

Securing resources commensurate with the high level of need requires broad-based advocacy and bipartisan support. One program of necessary scale – the mortgage interest tax deduction – has some bipartisan agreement on the need for revision and realignment of public funds to better meet public policy goals (via a proposed cap on deductions), but no consensus on what should be done with the savings. A compelling argument that includes significant political gain will be necessary to shift tax savings to expenditures, and our industry should play a key role in advocating for targeting housing dollars to populations experiencing critical housing need.

ADVOCACY TOOLKITS AND THE POWER OF THE LOCAL LESSON

To be effective advocates with our elected representatives, an important tool lies in the power of the local lesson – connecting the politics of D.C. with work on the ground and empowering local delegates to act as advocates for our work. Many cities experience similar issues, and while there is much local attention, there is an opportunity as a potential inflection point to build a national focus and response based on local lessons. Wartell notes that we are reaching a turning point on issues of race and civil rights, and as issues of disparity come to the forefront of political dialogue, it is important that the conversation includes the mechanisms that create and reinforce disparity. There are many opportunities for collaboration between practitioners and researchers, and we in the affordable housing and community development fields can utilize our experience to promote strategies that work by identifying key individuals in the next administration and providing them with concise, compelling data and narratives.

This summary is an adaptation of the “live notes” displayed during the discussion and may not reflect the views of POAH or of the speakers' organizations.