

President's Corner

In 1986, I accepted a job at the Chelmsford Housing Authority after school and during the summers. The hours were filled with interesting challenges of learning how to calculate rents, manage the waiting list, do inspections, speak to applicants about our programs and then teach my two co-workers how to use a computer. Processing applications was one of my least favorite



tasks, as I had to provide an estimated wait time, which ranged from one to five years. Many people would stop by the office to express their immediate need for housing, some would exclaim they would be dead by the time their name came to the top and others were just plain scared about their future.

One of my favorite parts of the job was my interaction with the residents. Every Tuesday, Bertha would wait for her ride outside of McFarlin Manor. All dressed up, she was on a mission to complete two very important tasks: a visit to the hairdresser and then to the grocery store. Over time, the sweet smile and wave of a hand turned into short visits. Then the short visits turned into conversations over Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies. She would share stories about her life as a widow, her gratitude for being able to come to America from Portugal, having children, grandchildren and the struggles with getting older. Bertha was someone who took time out of her life to sit with me in the office, send me little notes when I was away at

college and show me how much I was cared for. She gave meaning to the repetitive tasks and regulations I saw each day. I felt a sense of purpose that showed me the difference public housing could make in our community.

In 1994, I was hired as the Executive Director of the Chelmsford Housing Authority at the age of 24. I had this naïve idea that I could now change everything and fix the world. Little did I realize that change does not come from one person working towards a goal, but from a group of people who share a common vision and passion. Thankfully, with the support of my Board, my amazing staff, and an engaged community we have been able to grow from about 250 units of housing to an agency that manages over 1,400. But even with that growth, the need is still tremendous and much work remains to be done.

Over the past 20+ years, I have served on the various Committees of MassNAHRO and on the Board. This past year, MassNAHRO implemented its first strategic plan with seven very clear goals, among them: increase housing opportunities through an expansion of our educational opportunities; heighten our focus on legislation; increase funding and resources; and work towards deregulation of public housing through the engagement of our residents, our communities, our peers and the Legislature. We must continue to explore ways to become even

more innovative and work collaboratively towards a common goal of preserving and expanding the valuable resources of each local housing authority.

As your new President, I am committed to working collaboratively to achieve the goals set forth in the Strategic Plan implemented under our immediate Past President Brian Costello and our capable Executive Director Donna Brown. I recognize that success towards our goals is not a path taken by one individual, but by a group of committed members who feel safe sharing their ideas, struggles and hopes. We all have a duty to protect, preserve and expand our housing and services for the next generation of residents like Bertha. Together we can all make a difference in the lives of our residents and the communities we represent. In the words of Jane Goodall: "What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."

(Reprinted from the June/July 2019 edition of the Massachusetts NAHRO newsletter.)