

Public housing is an investment in the public good

Here in Boston, however, we need not wait on Washington. We have it in our power to add more public housing for our families and seniors now.



When it comes to public housing, successive Republican and Democratic presidential administrations have disinvested for decades. But there's a simple solution to build more in Boston – and mechanisms to fund it.

In Boston, the city built public housing communities in the early years of the federal program, when still politically popular. This means we have public housing for low-income families, seniors, and people with disabilities across almost all neighborhoods, with better access to public transportation and shared public amenities, than most American cities. As the cost-of-living in Boston becomes more expensive, these units are too often the only way for to anchor low-income people and people of color in the neighborhoods where they've built their lives and nourished vibrant communities.

Permanent, deeply affordable housing, with rent prorated according to income, keeps people stably housed even when shocked by the twin crises of the coronavirus pandemic and [a state jobless rate of 17.4 percent – the highest in the country](#). When families gain access to public housing, they are also able to immediately spend more money to feed their children. These opportunities are far too rare; the waitlist for the Boston Housing Authority stretches more than 50,000 families long, with only about 500 units turning over each year. As Boston has scrambled during the COVID-19 pandemic to expand our safe shelter capacity and called on landlords to house our families with vouchers, the connection between secure housing and public health couldn't be more clear. People cannot be safe from the coronavirus – or effectively control its spread – when they're doubling up in overcrowded apartments, packing into congregate shelters, or out on the street. Public housing acknowledges that a healthy society depends upon access to decent and sanitary homes for all.

Yet for decades, public housing has been denigrated in our political culture as a relic of another era, bound inevitably for extinction. In 1999, the federal [Faircloth Amendment](#) formalized this hostility by making it law that no housing authority could thereafter add any more public housing units than it operated that year. Ever since, housing authori-

ties across the country have been capped at “Faircloth Limits,” unable to add to a critical resource even as waitlists swell. Even though an investment in public housing is an investment in the public good.

Earlier this month, recognizing the urgent need for government reinvestment in public housing, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York led passage of an amendment to the Democrats’ Moving Forward Act in the US House to repeal the Faircloth Amendment. That repeal now languishes in the US Senate.

Here in Boston, however, we need not wait on Washington. We have it in our power to add more public housing for our families and seniors now. Because of redevelopment projects after 1999 that de-densified Boston’s public housing stock, the City today has only 9,622 public housing units, whereas our Faircloth Limit is 12,086. We could build, buy, or certify up to 2,464 more public housing units and immediately begin receiving federal subsidies for each. That’s untapped federal housing support we’re already entitled to — and we can combine it with another federal program, Rental Assistance Demonstration to make these units financially sustainable.

In large, new, private developments, we could make blocks of affordable housing units provided through the Inclusionary Development Policy more deeply affordable — converting them to this federal subsidy to house families making 30 percent of area median income or below. We could also combine this subsidy with other tools at the Department of Neighborhood Development to scoop existing apartment buildings off the speculative market and attach deeper affordability restrictions.

The most exciting prospect, however, would be to build new public housing units on land the City controls, whether at existing public housing developments, vacant lots, or above other public assets. This is an important way to truly utilize the full value of public land for public good. To further our citywide fair housing goals, these new units could be distributed across the city, with a special focus on neighborhoods from which people of color and people with low-incomes have been historically excluded.

To build these new units anywhere, we will need capital. Two bills currently pending before the Massachusetts Legislature would do just that. [House bill 4514](#) would direct a tax on real estate transfers to help fund affordable housing, while [House bill 4115](#) would allow Boston to raise more linkage funds. The City can also expand its capital budget to include new money for this housing, as a countercyclical investment in our local economy and a statement that public housing is long-term public infrastructure that truly preserves our community. Making a plan for Boston to get back up to our Faircloth Limit is a way of breathing reality into the phrases hovering on our lips in these hard days: Housing is healthcare. Housing is a human right. Housing is for all.

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