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Toward a community-based solution to the housing crisis

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The Housing Assistance Corporation's recent report, "Housing on Cape Cod: The High Cost of Doing Nothing," presented excellent data to support facts we've been acutely aware of and struggling with on the Lower and Outer Cape for more than a decade. Affordable rentals have become impossible to find. Waiting lists for affordable or subsidized housing are on average 3-5 years at best. The size of waiting lists for the 72 units managed by the Community Development Partnership have tripled over the past three years.

For those lucky enough to find year-round rentals, payments are upwards of \$2500 a month, before utilities and other costs. This is a recipe for disaster for many of the clients served at agencies like the CDP and the Homeless Prevention Council.

Finding solutions is complicated, but here's our challenge to the Lower and Outer Cape community:

We need our community to understand that most residents in need of affordable housing work full time. They staff our grocery stores, restaurants, and perform work in the trades and construction to keep the Lower and Outer Cape economy ticking. Many work multiple jobs, yet live one paycheck away from financial disaster. The reason is simple - the cost of housing. A single parent working full time for \$20 an hour, earning \$41,600 annually, cannot possibly afford housing costs of \$30,000 per year. We must invest as a community in creating more affordable options for these residents, through new housing development and other creative solutions.

We should be beyond stating the obvious. We're far past a precipice or potential crisis. We are working every day within a housing crisis that is growing increasingly worse despite the efforts of many. Our solutions are too often short term, helping families and seniors stay housed or make near-impossible payments while they sacrifice basics like adequate food or heat.

Local nonprofits, political leaders, town administrators, building developers, and all of us living in the eight towns on the Lower Cape need to collectively develop realistic housing options for residents - and we need to do it NOW. While incentivizing landlords with a small stipend may affect the availability of year-round housing in the Mid and Upper Cape communities, where seasonal rentals are utilized less, our local economy's seasonality makes that impossible. So, we're challenging our nonprofit partners and the rest of our community to come to the table to develop solutions before more of our workforce leaves the Lower and Outer Cape.

Finally, we can't lose sight of our most vulnerable residents - our young families and seniors who simply can no longer afford to live in our community. The number of Orleans residents between the ages of 25 and 34 declined by 62 percent from 1990-2015. This is not an aberration. Most of our clients from across the community are young and middle-aged families, most with children.

And don't forget our vulnerable seniors. In 2017, 123 single seniors came to HPC for services. Historically, we have seen about 30 seniors annually. These numbers increase every year, and there is no end in sight. If we can't address housing options for our workforce, are senior citizens next?

We hope through efforts, such as the CDP's Housing Institute and HPC's advocacy, outreach and program development for vulnerable residents, community leaders will join to take bold action in 2019. We need a community-based solution to address this regional problem, which if left unsolved will damage the health of the Lower and Outer Cape forever. Only together can we provide the vibrant, diverse and economically fragile community we love with a viable future.