Cross Country Connections: What we can learn from Irish social housing

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Andrea Aldana,
Director of Housing Advocacy

In mid-October CDP’s Director of Housing Advocacy Andrea Aldana traveled to Ireland with a delegation of housing advocates from across the state to participate in an “Affordable Housing Learning Journey.” The 20 participants included leaders of community development corporations, state housing agency officials, lenders, policy thinkers, architects, developers, and elected officials.

With the goal of studying Ireland’s approach to building affordable housing, the trip was organized by the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations, Massachusetts Housing Partnership, and NeighborWorks Southern Mass in collaboration with the Irish Council for Social Housing. Funding from the Kuehn Foundation provided scholarships for younger housing professionals, such as Andrea, to participate in the trip. The delegation met with housing leaders, toured projects and neighborhoods, and attended the Irish Council for Social Housing Conference in Wexford.

The trip began with the biennial Irish Council for Social Housing Conference where 300 housing professionals from across Ireland shared best practices and competed for national housing awards. Housing awards were given for family housing, low income housing, senior housing and housing for people with disabilities. Chrystal Kornegay, Executive Director of Mass Housing and former Under Secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, was a presenter at the conference.

The group visited a senior living residence where residents can be accommodated for a live-in caretaker or family member. In Irish social housing developments, once you have moved in you cannot be kicked out, regardless of income. There was also a high level of resident services on site.
Connections between Ireland and Massachusetts run deep. “It was really interesting to learn that just like our own urban and rural housing crisis, it was created in large part as a result of historical land use and housing policies,” says Andrea. She was also struck by the similarities between our housing challenges on Cape Cod and in Ireland. Both struggle with low wages that can’t sustain market rents, long waiting lists for subsidized housing units, an aging population and resistance to new housing development.

According to Andrea one major takeaway was how “climate change was embedded in all conversations related to housing and there was significant discussion about environmental sustainability and green building design.” But “perhaps the most innovative thing we learned,” says Andrea “was that housing is considered a human right in Ireland.” Other ideas that sparked interest included regionalized solutions, scattered housing, spot-or short term- rent control in response to current housing conditions, and innovative approaches to senior living.

“I am really proud that Andrea’s leadership through her work on the CDP’s Lower Cape Housing Institute and the Lower Cape Community Housing Partnership, was recognized and that she was asked to join this distinguished group of Massachusetts housing advocates,” said Jay Coburn, CEO of the CDP. “While the Lower and Outer Cape is unique, many of our housing challenges are not and this was a great opportunity to learn how other communities both in the Commonwealth and Ireland are rising to the affordable housing challenge.”

If you would like to learn more about the Learning Journey to Ireland, read Joe Kriesberg’s blog here. Kriesberg is President and CEO of Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations and traveled to Ireland as part of the delegation.