

## Get Housing in the Game!

As of Tax Day 2015, at least four major candidates had declared they are running for President. By the time we get to NH&RA's Summer Institute, we could have a baker's dozen or more candidates.

Based on the rhetoric so far, almost all will be saying that income and wealth inequality are real issues in the campaign, challenges to the American Dream. Yet if history is a guide, almost none of them will have much, if anything, to say about one of the biggest costs in every family's budget: housing.

Rather than grumble, as many of us in the housing industry often do, that our issues are never top tier, it's time to get ahead of the politics and policy. It's time to get housing in the game.

Most readers of *Tax Credit Advisor* know the numbers and the magnitude of the problem: The average minimum wage worker in America would have to work 2.6 full-time jobs to afford a decent two-bedroom apartment without being rent burdened (paying over 30% of income for a roof over your head.) Homeownership has hit a 20-year low – which means the share of Americans renting has hit a 20-year high. And despite some construction recovery, supply is not keeping up with demand, particularly for working families and many others entering the rental market.

Reis, Inc., reports that the U.S. average rent has climbed 14 percent to \$1,124 since 2010, four percentage points faster than inflation, and more than double the rise in U.S. home prices over the same period. Rents are projected to rise yet another 3.3 percent this year, to an average of \$1,161.

Data, however, is not what moves policy alone. Our industry is well positioned. We house millions of Americans, we are dispersed in all 50 states, and our developers and other industry leaders are regularly in contact with elected officials. So what is needed to move this industry's issues higher up on the agenda?

There are many ways to approach this topic, but a few fundamentals make sense. The first question to ask is: What is the affordable housing community's agenda

for 2016? Is there a key goal beyond defending the Housing Tax Credit, one of the most important and successful public-private partnerships in the last 40 years of national policy?

But a larger question is: How does this issue connect to the larger debate? Does it speak only to housers, or do



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these issues have a larger constituency? Does the voting public realize how housing expenses are impacting their overall financial well-being and the stability of our society?

This is where the burden falls back on us to make the case, early and often and loudly, on just how a strong affordable housing policy at the national level makes a difference in the lives of families in Iowa and New Hampshire and South Carolina and dozens of other states, that gets us past the usual division between government programs and private sector solutions.

Take the question of housing costs and savings. Policy experts as politically diverse as the conservative American Enterprise Institute and the liberal Center

for American Progress have noted that saving while renting is extremely challenging. This opens up the opportunity for those of us in the industry to shape the discussion around wealth and opportunity in ways that show housing policy is a major part of the solution to the opportunity gap, in real and tangible ways.

None of this will be simple. It is far easier to have a group discussion of an important point of tax law than to get most of us to coalesce around a fine point of policy.

But the time is now to be ready for 2016. If we do not get ahead of the topic, the housing debate of 2016 will be a rehash of whether Fannie Mae did or did not hurt the economy by having an affordable home ownership agenda. That gets us nowhere, but it is all too likely to happen if we sit on the sidelines. **TCA**