

# Community leaders tackle housing justice at university summit

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By: Nancy Sheehan

Worcester State University brought together community organizations, affordable housing advocates, housing experts, and city officials on March 12 for its first Housing Justice Summit. The event featured panel discussions, presentations, and a networking event that focused on issues surrounding the region's housing crisis and resulting housing insecurity. The Commonwealth, like much of the rest of the country, has been challenged by high home-buying costs, skyrocketing rents, a dire shortage of affordable and accessible housing, and a demand for emergency shelter that far exceeds capacity.

"It's a huge housing crisis," said Trish Appert, executive director of Friendly House, a multi-service community center in Worcester. "We provide a lot of different programs, anti-poverty programs, food pantries, case management, immigration, housing, counseling, and an array of family shelter and transitional housing. But the best we can do is to try to ameliorate everything else and help people keep their head up above water with housing because when they lose that it's very hard to pull them back."

Appert was part of a 12-person panel that addressed a wide range of housing issues from the lack of accessible apartments to homeless high school students relying on couch-surfing at the homes of friends.

The event was presented by the Urban Studies Department's Urban Action Institute, the John J. Binienda Center for Community Engagement at Worcester State, Quinsigamond Community

College, and UniBank. Opening remarks were given by Provost Lois Wim and QCC president Dr. Luis Pedraja.

Wims said solving this many-faceted issue is crucial for preserving the quality of life in Worcester and building a brighter future for the next generation. She cited a recent study showing that among small rental hubs in the country, the Worcester-Springfield market ranked as the 9th most competitive market with 96.5 percent of its apartments occupied.

“Clearly, this summit is tackling the right issue at the right time,” she said. The summit aligns with Worcester State’s 150-year history of dedication to civic engagement by addressing a pressing issue in the community, she said.

Wims noted that Worcester State has been recognized with the Carnegie Foundation Community Engagement Classification, which acknowledges the university’s commitment to building and strengthening partnerships within the community.

“The Housing Justice Summit is a powerful example of such collaborations and partnerships,” she said. “We embrace the opportunity to work collaboratively with our friends at Quinsigamond Community College as conveners and partners on this issue. I’m excited to see us bring together the academic expertise of our faculty and staff, the talents of our students and the knowledge of government agencies, elected offices, nonprofits, and grassroots organizations.”

Dr. Pedraja discussed the personal importance of addressing housing injustice in the community by sharing his own experiences growing up in an impoverished neighborhood and the impact it had on his family. He also highlighted the history of redlining and discrimination that has led to wealth inequality and exclusion from fair housing for people of color.

He emphasized that housing injustice affects the entire community and reflects its values and said that 11% of students at Quinsigamond face housing insecurity. “It’s something that doesn’t just affect community college students,” he said. “It affects students at Worcester State. It affects students at Holy Cross. It affects students at Clark that can’t find affordable housing here who are living in

unsafe conditions or when there are multiple students sharing a place or house surfing. That's a challenge, along with food security and other pieces."

But it's not just a problem for the students, Pedraja said. He also highlighted the challenges faced by faculty and staff in finding affordable housing, which can impact the ability to attract and retain talent.

The fact that the housing crisis has grown so severe that it now is impacting the middle class, such as college faculty and people with jobs good-paying sectors like the life sciences, has led to heightened political attention to the issue, Appert said, including pro-housing comments made by Gov. Maura Healey when she visited Worcester for a Chamber of Commerce event recently.

"I've been working in this field for quite a long time, but it's now hurting people higher up in the income distribution and that's why we're talking about it," Appert said. "That's why the governor was out here last week talking about how life sciences companies in Worcester are having a difficult time, even at that income level, getting people to come to Worcester."

Recently, Governor Healy filed a \$4 billion housing bond bill meant to help alleviate the crisis. During the panel, State Sen. Robyn Kennedy, a member of the Housing Summit panel, said the measure, called the Homes Act, has come out of committee but still awaits action in the full Legislature. She explained that the act includes provisions for affordable housing, supportive services, alternative housing vouchers, and policy changes such as making accessory dwelling units (ADUs) allowable by right and easier implementation of inclusionary zoning policies.

Kennedy said it was important to ensure that we are providing housing for all members of the community, not just the more recently impacted middle class. She was critical of restrictive measures some people are proposing that would limit who can be housed in an emergency shelter and how long they can stay there. "Let me be clear, and I say this repeatedly, eligibility restrictions and time limitations do not end homelessness, do not prevent homelessness, and do not keep people housed," she said.

As measures are enacted to address the crisis, it is important that we not lose sight of those most in need, she said. “If we don’t begin by helping those who are most marginalized, those that have the least access to housing as it exists today, then we’re never going to get this right and we’re never going to solve this problem,” she said. Alex Corrales, CEO of the Worcester Housing Authority, provided an overview of the role and responsibilities of his organization in addressing housing needs in the community. He said that the housing authority’s 3,000 apartments can be found in every zip code in Worcester, serving families, elders, individuals with disabilities, and children. The WHA also provides Section 8 vouchers to nearly 4,500 families. However, there is a significant waitlist for both public housing and Section 8, with wait times ranging from three to five years for public housing and around 10 years for Section 8, he said. “In terms of my waitlist and public housing, I have about 6,000 to 7,000 people on my federal waitlist and about 20,000 on my state waitlist,” he said. “So, when you apply for public housing, your wait can be anywhere from three to five years, and that’s being somewhat optimistic.”

The housing authority is focused on redevelopment to address its aging properties and increase accessibility, Corrales said. The WHA also is committed to helping residents achieve self-sufficiency and has seen an increase in families buying homes since implementing programs to help first-time home buyers.

The panel also included two Worcester State alumni, Leah Bradley ’97, executive director of the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance, and Evis Terpollari ’08, City of Worcester homeless projects manager. Bradley suggested several measures that can help solve the housing crisis, including implementing mixed-income housing which she believes can help break the cycle of poverty. This approach can also address the issue of affordable housing being concentrated in specific areas, she said.

“Mixed income housing really helps to move children out of poverty,” she said. “When you live in poverty and that’s all you see, you don’t know that there’s something else. Mixed income housing allows us

to provide some chance for those children to see something else and it really does help break the cycle.”

Terpollari, whose family immigrated to Worcester from Albania, said he personally has experienced the challenges of homelessness that so many on the panel spoke about. He addressed the current state of housing in Worcester and the challenges faced by the city in addressing housing equality and homelessness. He said that there are approximately 545 individuals in shelters, with only 30% meeting the definition of chronic homelessness. The city has implemented various initiatives, such as the construction of housing units for the homeless and the development of tiny homes for individuals, however, there is still a need for much more affordable housing, he said.

The panel also included Sean Harris, director of Community Engagement at Quinsigamond Community College; Steve Stolberg, housing assistance coordinator at Center for Living & Working in Worcester; Benji Kemper, community organizer at the Center for Living & Working; Annessia Jimenez, community organizer at Worcester Common Ground; Tasia Cerezo, co-founder and CEO of Meryl's Safe Haven; and Darshia Diaz, system navigator at Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance.

In her remarks, Wims said the expertise, talent and commitment of the panelists ensured that we would be able to move the needle toward a shared vision for housing justice, and she challenged students in the audience to join the effort.

“I want to encourage our students to step up and step into the conversation,” she said. “Seek out opportunities to make a difference on this issue with the community part