

IN MEMORIAM

Amy Anthony: 1944–2018

Work Transformed Affordable Housing in Mass., America

By Joseph Flatley and Clark Ziegler | Special to Banker & Tradesman | Dec 16, 2018



Amy Anthony

The affordable housing world lost a giant with the death of Amy Anthony on Dec. 9. We had the privilege of working for her in the 1980s when she served as secretary of community development for then-Gov. Michael Dukakis and we collaborated with her in all the years since.

For those of us who knew Amy, she was such a force of nature that it is hard to imagine the world without her. Housing leaders all over the country have reacted the same way when hearing news of her death: “I owe so much of my career and professional life to her.”

Amy played a central role in almost every major advance in affordable housing over the past five decades. When the federal government decided to explore tenant-based rent subsidies in the early 1970s as an alternative to subsidized housing development, Amy led one of the first demonstration projects in the country as director of the Springfield-based Housing Allowance Project. That pioneering effort led to what is now the federal Section 8 housing voucher program.

At a time when mixed-income housing development was only starting to get traction around the country, Amy transformed Massachusetts into a national leader with new financing programs that spurred development of more than 10,000 units of combined market rate and affordable housing. She also expanded the state’s public housing stock when other states were in retreat, and with the governor’s support she pushed suburban leaders hard to allow development of quality rental housing for low-income families.

After the Reagan Administration sharply curtailed the federal government’s role in building affordable housing, Amy was a leading voice on the National Housing Task Force – better known as the Maxwell Commission – in designing new federally funded programs that empowered states and cities to fill the leadership gap.

Setting the Bar High

After her service in state government, Amy continued to have enormous impact, first in the 1990s as the president of a private housing development company, Housing Investments, Inc. and then from 2001 to 2015 as president and CEO of a newly formed nonprofit, Preservation of Affordable Housing Inc.



POAH is a national leader in acquiring and improving subsidized housing and keeping it affordable and well-maintained for the long term. Under Amy's leadership its portfolio grew to more than 9,000 affordable homes at more than 100 properties in 11 states and the District of Columbia.

Nothing epitomizes her leadership more than POAH's role in redevelopment of the Woodlawn neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, which is focused not just on real estate but on expanding access to jobs, education and other opportunities for neighborhood residents. That vision of expanded opportunity is now embodied in a matched college savings program open to young residents of POAH-owned properties that was launched last year in her name.

Despite her many successes Amy never lost the idealism that drove her to affordable housing in the first place. She was passionate about making the housing delivery system more effective and more accountable. She was never reluctant to criticize the very system that she had spent her life being a part of. In an interview upon her retirement in 2015, she lamented "the fundamental, gross unfairness of the system that we've created," which helps a significant number of people obtain affordable housing but leaves most others behind.

"If you're a mother with a couple of children and you've got a decent hourly-paid job, you cannot afford to rent a place to live," she said. "That's unfair and inadequate. It needs to be corrected."

Beyond her many professional accomplishments, we knew Amy simply as a wonderful human being. She was a good friend and mentor, she had an infectious sense of humor (often at her own expense), and she never lost her perspective. She was just as comfortable talking to a low-income single mom or a small-town selectman as she would be in a meeting with members of Congress or movers and shakers in the housing industry.

Amy set the bar high for a new generation of housing leaders and she will be greatly missed.

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