



Investment in well-being

Speaker: Affordable housing advances children's health, school performance

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By Christine Dunn, Journal Staff Writer

CRANSTON - By not investing enough in affordable housing today, our country is ensuring it will face greater costs down the road for education, health care and even criminal justice, according to Dr. Megan Sandel, a professor of pediatrics and public health at Boston University.

Sandel was one of the keynote speakers at Monday's Housing Summit, a conference of more than 300 housing, community and faith leaders, organized by the United Way of Rhode Island and held at Rhodes on the Pawtuxet.

Governor Raimondo introduced Sandel, after urging the crowd to work during the coming spring months to build support for her proposed \$40-million affordable housing bond, which is included in her new budget plan.

"I want the housing bond on the ballot in November," Raimondo said. "... I wish it was more, to be honest," the governor added. "It isn't enough." But "schools, Quonset, roads and bridges need money, too."

"The average family making the median income in Rhode Island has a very hard time finding an affordable place to live," Raimondo said. She added that "affordable housing doesn't mean a housing project."

At the conclusion of the meeting, United Way president and CEO Anthony Maione said that his organization, Bank of America and National Grid have together pledged \$150,000 to help promote affordable housing goals in Rhode Island this year. He added that in 2015, United Way logged 60,000 calls from Rhode Islanders needing help with housing costs.

Dr. Sandel's research has documented the harm that a lack of housing affordability, stability and quality does to children's health and school performance. In Rhode Island, 36 percent of

homeowners were "cost burdened" in 2013, while 51 percent of the state's renters were spending more than 30 percent of their incomes on housing.

Sandel spoke of stable, safe affordable housing, located in "neighborhoods of opportunity" as a "vaccine" that "builds resiliency" among children against "multiple threats."

She noted that "there is a lot of continuum between homelessness and stable, affordable housing in a neighborhood of opportunity." Children in families that struggle with housing costs and/or have to move frequently are also more likely to face threats from lead, food insecurity, issues such as asthma linked to pests and mold, and their performance at school suffers as a result, Sandel pointed out. These children are more likely to need costly special education, and have more health care costs, she said.

Many children in insecure housing situations "are not homeless, but they look like homeless kids in their health outcomes."

Housing inaffordability is "a hidden problem" and is "much more common than we think," she said. "The secret to urban education is affordable housing," she added, even though "we universally blame teachers for kids not learning."

Adrienne Gagnon, executive director of DownCity Design, led a "creative community conversation," in which the summit group met in small groups to identify and discuss factors involved in housing affordability issues. She said the results will be organized and shared in April.

The group also heard from Elizabeth Falcon, director of housing advocacy for the Coalition for Nonprofit Housing & Economic Development in Washington, D.C, who described the group's successful efforts to advocate for housing funds; and Jessica Cigna, from HousingWorks RI, who has been working on a housing needs study for Rhode Island Housing.