Helen McIlvaine, Housing Director, City of Alexandria

Comments for NVAHA 2020 Regional Housing Leaders Awards Ceremony &

15th Anniversary Celebration

Thank you, Shelley, and thank you, Mayor Wilson, for your very generous remarks. It is a privilege to work with, and for, a community whose residents and elected leaders value diversity and inclusion, whose housing policies and investments reflect these values, and who believe that acting regionally, with our partners, creates power.

First, I would like to congratulate tonight’s other honorees: the work you do is inspiring and impactful, and I am humbled to be in your company.

Thank you, Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, NVAHA, and Michelle, for selecting me as a 2020 Regional Housing Leader, and congratulations on your 15th anniversary!

So many of us rely on NVAHA’s thought leadership, its work as a convenor, its research and analysis of model developments and industry best practices, and its coverage of emerging affordable housing trends and policies. Thank you for providing the quality information and strategic advocacy that propels our work.

COVID-19 has challenged us all, and this celebration is no exception. But, for those who know me, you already know that through my rose-colored glasses, the glass of life is always ¾ full, and I am so pleased to be sharing this moment, virtually, with my husband, Dean, our kids and their wonderful partners and children (Hello from Minnie!), my mother, my three brothers and their families, and my amazing cousins, the Malagues, as well as some dear friends. Your love and support mean everything to me and underlie every accomplishment that is attributed to me.

I also want to thank my work family – Office of Housing staff with their beautiful “hearts for Housing,” my City colleagues who always have Housing’s back, and my bosses, City Manager Mark Jinks, and Deputy City Manager Emily Baker. Both are invaluable sounding boards and show me how to lead by putting the community’s needs first. I appreciate that they always try to do the right thing, especially when it’s hard, and producing affordable housing is often hard.
At the risk of being memed as Sally Fields, I also want to acknowledge my colleagues in the affordable housing development trenches: the nonprofits, funders, developers, lenders, attorneys, and partners, and especially Virginia Housing, Enterprise, and COG. I feel fortunate to have found such gratifying work, and your commitment to our shared housing mission makes me proud to call you allies and friends.

While the scrum that defines tax credit competition would have outside observers imagine us as rivals, instead I see our collective desire to do good, to serve those who need housing, to share knowledge and resources, to brainstorm solutions, to lead with innovation, and to cheer one another’s victories, as our secret power. NVAHA has shown that a victory for any is a victory for all, and those we serve. That is regional collaboration at work.

I had the chance to speak at my high school graduation, and referred then to a quote from Dorothy Day, that seems apropos to this time, too:

**No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.**

When we consider the challenges we face in this moment, it is clear that, increasing housing supply, deepening affordability, expanding access and ensuring stability and security for all, are central to achieving the racial equity and social justice we seek. It is key to our collective financial, physical and emotional recovery from this terrible pandemic. For those of us working from home (also known as living at work), how much harder have these six months been for those in our region without a secure home?

Creating housing opportunity is also at the heart of loving our neighbors, including those who have risked all, so their children can achieve the American dream, and ensuring that they can make their homes in our communities, too.

Let us channel our superpower as a region, and resolve tonight to lean into our strengths, our partnerships, our expertise, and our shared sense of mission. The affordable housing industry must be a leader in both the current reckoning, and in addressing the systemic problems that have to be resolved to move toward a future reconciliation. As you can see, **No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.**
I look forward to celebrating our progress, and our victories, together, next year, at NVAHA’s Sweet 16 party.

Congratulations, NVAHA.

Now, let’s get to work!