

Fact Sheet: What you need to know about affordable housing in Arlington?

Arlington Town Hall. Wicked Local File Photo

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The [first part](#) of our series about residents in affordable housing units in Arlington prompted a lot of discussion in the community about affordable housing in Arlington: How does it work? What type of affordable units are available in town? How much affordable housing does Arlington currently have?

We set out to try and answer your questions and provide some basic information about affordable housing. The Arlington Planning Department provided most of this data.

What is affordable housing?

The Massachusetts affordable housing law, known as Chapter 40B, is a statute passed by the state legislature in 1969 in order to address a statewide shortage of affordable housing. Under this law, affordable housing is defined as a unit that can be purchased or rented by a household making no more than 80 percent area median income.

These income limits in Arlington equate to a maximum income of:

- \$51,150 for one-person household
- \$65,750 for a three-person household
- \$84,750 for a six-person household.
- One is having 10 percent of a community's housing inventory priced affordable under the 40B law.
- The other is to have affordable housing on at least 1.5 percent of total buildable land in a community.
- A community only needs to reach one of these thresholds, which is known as safe harbor status.
- If they don't, developers can build projects that override local zoning bylaws so long as 20 or 25 percent of that project's units are priced affordably.

What kind of affordable housing is in Arlington?

A variety of organizations operate several different classifications of affordable housing in Arlington:

-- The [Arlington Housing Authority](#) is a state-supported organization that operates housing programs that provide direct housing in government-owned developments or subsidized housing in private-owned units for people low-income people. AHA developments are eligible to receive funds through the town's [Community Development Block Grant program](#), which is made possible through federal funding. AHA units are sold for no more than 80 percent area median income. Currently, AHA, which operates developments such as Drake Village and Menotomy Manor, has 519 elderly units, 176 family units and 20 other units for people outside those designations.

-- The [Housing Corporation of Arlington](#) is a non-profit organization that provides housing to those making no more than 60 percent area median income. Income limits are \$41,220 for a one person household, \$52,980 for a three person household and \$68,280 for a six person household. HCA typically receive CDBG funds and Community Preservation Act funds. They currently operate 93 units in town for families and small households, with another 57 in the development stages. Some of their projects include the Capitol Square Apartments and units in the HCA's Forest and Peirce Street projects. Three future incoming HCA projects are slated for 20 Westminster Ave., 117 Broadway and 19R Park Place.

-- Inclusionary zoning units derive from a town zoning bylaw that requires any project with six or more units to provide 15 percent of those units at affordably priced levels. There are 11 condos in town that sell at 70 percent area median income and 43 rental units that sell at 60 percent area median income.

-- Another four condos are affordably priced as part of a project that received a 40B comprehensive permit from the town's Zoning Board of Appeals. These condos are part of the Minuteman Village complex on Brattle Street, which is the only project to date to receive a 40B comprehensive permit. A 219-unit 40B development known as the Mugar project, which many residents and officials vehemently oppose, has been proposed for Thorndike Place.

-- Caritas Communities, a regional non-profit, offers 37, permanently affordable units for weekly rent.

-- There is also Section 8 subsidized housing, a federal government program for assisting very low-income families, the elderly and disabled. People obtain vouchers they can use to reduce the price of housing from the AHA or another landlord in the area who accepts the vouchers, but it is hard to track the number of residents using these because people who get these vouchers don't have to use them in Arlington.

All of these units, except Section 8 housing, count toward the Chapter 40B requirement that a town have either 1.5 percent of its land area or 10 percent of its housing units devoted to affordable housing.

Where does Arlington stand?

In terms of housing inventory

- 5.64 percent of the town's total housing inventory is priced affordably under Chapter 40B.
- This percentage is higher than towns such as Belmont, Duxbury and Winchester.
- This percentage is lower than town such as Lexington, Needham, Lincoln, Littleton, Concord and Bedford.

According to a December 2014 [list](#) published by the state, nearly 50 of the 351 communities in the Commonwealth have achieved the 10 percent threshold.

In terms of total buildable land:

- The town is extremely close, or may have in fact reached 1.5 percent of total buildable land.
- Currently, the town is in a [legal battle](#) before the state's Housing Appeals Committee over the 1.5 percent requirement.
- The town claims 1.56 percent of its land area contains affordable housing, while a developer trying to build the Mugar project claims the town only has 1.39 percent.
- Once HCA completes their three upcoming projects, the town will likely have achieved the 1.5 percent requirement.

According to a spokesperson from the state's Department of Housing and Community Development, no communities have been certified by DHCD as reaching the 1.5 percent requirement.

The future

-- 166 more units of affordable housing have been created since 2000.

-- According to HCA, there are around 1,000 families in Arlington on a waiting list to get into affordable units.

-- According to the town's recently adopted housing production plan, there are currently 1,121 deed-restricted affordable units on the state's subsidized housing inventory.

-- There are currently 5,185 households in Arlington that would qualify for an affordable unit.

-- By 2020, according to the plan, demographic changes and projections suggest an additional 300-plus affordable units will be needed to meet demand.

-- Although this could be difficult given the scarcity of developable land in Arlington, the town is committed to expanding its affordable housing stock at the current rate or greater. The current rate would be the creation of roughly 10 new affordable units on an annual basis.