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AFFORDABLE HOUSING INSTITUTE NAMES BETSEY MARTENS 2015 AHI FELLOW

Betsey Martens, CEO of Boulder Housing Partners, has been named the 2015 AHI Fellow for her pioneering research into using public and affordable housing as a place-based nexus for disrupting the cycle of poverty by Bringing School Home, which creates a comprehensive public/private partnership to enable children from very low income households to supplement, complement, and reinforce the learning they need and want from the school system. The AHI Fellowship carries with it an 18-month curriculum, custom-designed by AHI in partnership with the Fellow, for collaboration, research and development, and eventual rollout of additional pilot sites beyond the two now operating in Boulder, CO and New York City.



AHI Fellow and Boulder HP CEO Betsey Martens with Bringing School Home parents at BHP's Kalmia property

“For me as an AHI Fellow,” said Betsey Martens, “this is both a tremendous honor and a tremendous opportunity to take what we have done in Boulder, contextualize it, and adapt it for scalability nationally. In Boulder, we have demonstrated some things that work powerfully, and I want to explore and demonstrate that we are not simply a successful experiment, but in the vanguard of a movement that can transform the effectiveness of public schooling.”

For the last 18 years, Boulder Housing Partners, the public housing authority of Boulder, Colorado, has been developing the partnership with I Have a Dream Foundation. Starting at age seven, selected children of public housing families are connected with a full time program director acting as a kind of uncle (*tio*) or aunt (*tia*), who follows the child and family all the way through their secondary education to assure high school graduation and post-secondary matriculation. The program offers a package of continuous learning – extending the school experience to after school, evenings and nights, on weekends, and during the summer. “In a child’s first 18 years, only 9% of his or her time is spent in

school; the remaining 91% is home-based,” Ms. Martens said. “As affordable housing providers we can work with parents to significantly affect what happens in that 91% space.” She added, “Bringing School Home has the data to prove it: 92% of our children graduate from high school, versus 63% of their peers.”

Research done by Ms. Martens during a four-week research sabbatical at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Study Center found that in the US, more than 1,000,000 children drop out of school annually, a massive loss of previous educational investment and a disruption that impairs them economically throughout their lives. These dropouts, her work suggests, are in part a consequence of disrupted learning in the years before. For instance, not achieving third-grade reading by third grade proves a strong leading indicator of eventually dropping out, and significantly increases the likelihood of future incarceration, with consequent costs to people and society. “Up through third grade, a child is learning to read,” she said. “From third grade on, she reads to learn – and the system assumes she can read well enough to do that.” Such children fall further and further behind their peers, with dropping out an increasingly likely choice.

“At AHI, we know that housing is central to growing successful cities and successful families,” said AHI founder and CEO David A. Smith. “Affordable housing is where ‘fundamental jobs’ – those done by ordinary working people – go to sleep at night, and where the next generation of workers learns what the world is like. The more we can make the home a place of learning, safety, and role models, the better for children, families, communities, and the nation.” AHI works on pro-poor housing solutions worldwide, having worked in more than 25 countries from Abu Dhabi to Vietnam, and with current active work in Haiti, India, and Mexico. “Throughout the world,” he added, “improvements in the quality and affordability of housing yield multiplier effects on children’s education, family health, family stability, gender equity, income generation, and municipal governance. We’ve selected Betsey for an AHI Fellowship because her work is universally applicable and will benefit from peer-to-peer connections we can help her make in other countries and with other similar motivated actors.”

According to Ms. Martens, a central and over-looked ingredient in the recipe to close the achievement and opportunity gap for low income children is stable, quality, affordable housing. One of the most important things a child does is grow, and that includes learning, which happens continuously, all day every day, even if the out-of-school learning is subconscious. “Sleep is when the mind integrates knowledge and experience,” she said, “and disrupted sleep impairs in-school performance. Giving children safe and quiet homes to sleep in is essential.” The same applies to summer vacations; test scores show that children from higher-income families return with higher cognitive capacity after a summer; those with lower incomes fall behind their peers. “Bringing School Home is all about placing the child at the center of rings of help – her family and the BSH *education navigator*, her fellow public housing residents, and the public schools themselves.”

“For us in public housing,” said Preston Prince, President of NAHRO and Executive Director of the Fresno Housing Authority, “Betsey’s work directly addresses a missing link – research and evidence that can buttress NAHRO’s interest in pursuing legislative and regulatory change that will allow public housing to become not just a residential asset but the first and best place children learn how to be successful, independent, productive Americans.” This also furthers AHI’s mission, reported CEO David Smith: “We think the solution is its own salesware. Design or discover a successful program; improve it; help it become scalable and replicable; and make all that learning available, open-book, for public input and public benefit. That’s how you take intriguing ideas and transform them into actionable pilots and then effective broad-based movements.”

Fellowships serve as solutions laboratories and platforms for innovations so long as they are connected to deep subject-matter experience, said James Stockard, long-time public housing expert and retired chairman of Harvard Graduate School of Design's Loeb Fellowship Committee. "At Loeb we bring innovators from around the world for a year's study at Harvard so they can then take their ideas back home and be relaunched, refreshed. I welcome AHI's further innovation – the Fellowship as pilot booster – as a new and valuable approach, one that will be of great benefit to public housing as a whole."

Ms. Martens' fellowship was enthusiastically approved, 9-0, by Boulder Housing Partners' Board of Commissioners. "We couldn't be more pleased at what Betsey is doing," said Angela McCormick, board chairman. "With our support and AHI's Fellowship, we're looking forward to seeing these ideas taken to scale."

"When I went to Bellagio," concluded Ms. Martens, "I knew there was a limit to what I could accomplish as a practitioner. With this AHI Fellowship, I'm fully supported in taking powerful results from the field into a national research effort and policy dialogue."

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About the Affordable Housing Institute (AHI)

The [Affordable Housing Institute](#) works globally in housing programmatic initiatives, housing finance and financial structuring, and innovation. Our work encompasses thought leadership, impact consulting, and social venture capital. We work with pro-poor innovators to address systemic obstacles to affordable housing and to help them deliver homes, loans, and new ways of producing visible solutions that can be replicated and scaled. Our clients include key actors in housing such as governments, lenders, developers, development finance institutions, philanthropies, and community organizations. Twice funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we have pioneered the ecosystem/ value-chain approach to housing delivery and housing finance that we have used successfully in Haiti, Mongolia, Nigeria, Turkey, the US, Vietnam, and twenty more countries.

About Boulder Housing Partners (BHP)

[Boulder Housing Partners](#) is the housing authority serving the City of Boulder since 1966. BHP builds, owns, and manages quality affordable housing for low and moderate-income Boulder residents, and helps those residents pursue successful, productive, and dignified lives. BHP is one of only 39 public housing authorities in the United States participating in the prestigious Moving to Work program, which encourages innovation by providing flexibility in the use of federal funds. Its communities have won national and international awards for sustainability and affordable housing development.