

LISC fosters relationships to build communities

BY MICHAEL HARDMAN | Contributing Writer

JEANNE COLA SAYS SHE HAS THE BEST JOB in Rhode Island at a company that is the best-kept secret in the state.

The secret part is something the executive director of **Local Initiatives Support Corp. Rhode Island** wants to change. A 27-year-old nonprofit, LISC is a financial intermediary, directing investments to neighborhoods to help with developing affordable housing, improving families' incomes and wealth, and fostering healthy environments.

"We look at how we can be of help," said Cola. "In Rhode Island, we work statewide across different areas by building relationships."

LISC supports local businesses to revitalize commercial corridors, providing workforce development and education, developing affordable housing solutions, and working to improve the health of residents.

Using its 2017 numbers, LISC invested \$24.5 million in real estate, awarded \$2.3 million in grants, provided 9,532 hours of Americorps service, and provided 2,077 hours of technical assistance to 133 groups.

As the organization has grown, LISC has expanded its focus from financing projects to using its expertise to better the communities.

"We want to look at all of it," said Cola. "We want to make safe places and see reductions in crime." LISC also looks at creating natural open spaces and learning spaces to benefit the communities.

LISC had been involved in several projects recently that have drawn attention around the state. This year, the organization provided nearly \$13 million in grant funding, loans and a tax credit to Central Falls Health Station, which is expected to be a \$15 million project. LISC also worked with the state's congressional delegation to get an additional \$1 million federal grant for the effort. When completed, the project will aim to positively change the health outcome of the residents living there and serve as a role model for future projects.

The organization also has managed the Health Equity Zone in Pawtucket and Central Falls, two underserved areas, improving the residents' lives in those areas. LISC says it coordinated nearly 40 partners, state agencies, municipal interests and resident advisers to launch the program, which is being used by the state as a positive example of resolving a problem.

LISC says it created a 102-item action plan, working with community partners to make improve-

ments in nutritional access, building a 172-plot community garden at Galego Court, renovating the community park and farmers market, offering senior nutrition classes, improving recreation areas, starting walking groups, and a walking school bus.

Some of the projects LISC has been involved with include the new WaterFire Arts complex and the Urban Greens Food Co-op, which is expected to transform one Providence neighborhood from a food desert to "a vibrant oasis." It has also redesigned child care facilities to make them safer, and worked with law enforcement to address crime hot spots. One of those areas, Aleppo Street in Providence, saw a

98 percent reduction in calls after LISC's input.

To achieve its goals, LISC says it has become a trusted partner with local businesses and government over the years. It is committed to building strong neighborhoods and healthy communities to allow them to thrive.

Cola says making sure housing is affordable should be a high priority for communities. While the state's economy has slowly been on the rise, there is a catch. As the real estate market improves, there is more pressure on vulnerable residents to find housing. When people

are aging and downsizing, they are in the market for affordable housing in safe areas.

"A lot of people are one paycheck away [from having housing problems]," said Cola. "Housing is so important to individuals and families. This is really a high priority across the state."

With its experience, LISC's leadership hopes to continue to be one of the organizations working to solve that problem.

"There is no secret sauce," said Cola. "We want to bring everyone together and accomplish the same results." ■

'We work statewide across different areas **by building relationships.**'

JEANNE COLA,
 Local Initiatives Support Corp. Rhode Island
 executive director



**LOCAL INITIATIVES SUPPORT
 CORP. RHODE ISLAND**

HELPING HANDS: From left, Erin Cox, program officer; Cindy Larson, deputy director; Jeanne Cola, executive director; Megan Ressler, program assistant; and Deanna Bruno, program assistant, at LISC's Providence office.

PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY