

## WAHA A Unique Nonprofit Offering Housing Help

Jane O'Donnell has what she refers to as a "very unique job," not only in Westwood, but also across the state of Massachusetts. O'Donnell is the Westwood Affordable Housing Associates, Inc. (WAHA) Coordinator and is also a staff member for the town's Housing Authority. WAHA is the nonprofit arm of Westwood Housing Authority.

"Over 30 years ago, the federal laws changed, calling for all municipalities to have a minimum of 10 percent affordable housing," said O'Donnell. "A small group of townspeople worked very hard to create affordable housing opportunities here and were initially met with resistance. They had gone to Town Meeting several times and finally got the Housing Authority passed which led the way for WAHA. Very fearless people created the nonprofit. It stands on its own as a 501(c)3."

WAHA consists of the four elected Housing Authority officials and three appointed members. They meet quarterly and as needed. In addition, all elected Housing Authority Members sit on the WAHA board, and the Chairman of the Housing Authority serves as WAHA's President.

Currently WAHA's inventory is made up of six single-family homes and four multi-family units.

"We have existed very quietly in this town," said O'Donnell. "Out of respect to our residents, WAHA housing is scattered all over Westwood and there are no signs to mark them. It's been a very positive experience for all. We have had many kids go through our school system. We are always very discreet - especially so at the beginning when there was such pushback."

Rent is paid mainly by the resident or with a federal Section 8 housing voucher. And, the organization has also raised private funds. "Several years ago, we were given three

properties from a generous benefactor, although they needed a lot of work," said O'Donnell. "That put us in a bad position financially. Thankfully, the Town Administrator, Director of Finance and the Select Board supported us in getting \$1 million at Town Meeting and WAHA has used a portion of those funds to purchase two new single-family homes, and is actively looking for another property. At that time, with the support of town leadership, we created an agreement for a five-year capital project to update existing units which were badly in need of updating."

They are currently working on the last property of that capital project and plan to name it for former WAHA/WAHA Chair/President Juliet Onderdonk.

"We lost Juliet to cancer in 2019," said O'Donnell. "She was one of the original residents who started affordable housing in Westwood along with our current Vice-Chair Lou Rizoli, so we think it's appropriate that she be recognized in this way for her commitment to serving others."

O'Donnell says WAHA intentionally casts a wide net, seeking people from outside of Westwood to encourage diversity. WAHA started using a fair market housing lottery agent seven years ago to determine which applicants get WAHA housing when a home or unit becomes available. This gives people from hundreds of communities the opportunity to apply.

"It has really changed from this little, tiny organization struggling to make ends meet to this bigger picture you see today," said O'Donnell. "The world has changed considerably in terms of the housing that is needed so we trying to create more opportunities for hard working people. It's wonderful to see families move here and take advantage of the schools and contribute to our community. It's so rewarding."