



*The following is the keynote speech given by Avesta Housing President & CEO Jennifer Hawkins during Avesta Housing's "A Celebration of Home" event in Portland, ME, on Sept. 16, 2025:*

Welcome to Avesta Housing's "Celebration of Home" event! Thanks so much for joining us tonight to celebrate the impact of Avesta Housing – and to honor our valued partner, Southern Maine Agency on Aging.

I've been aboard for exactly two months now and have been so impressed by the dedication and talent of Avesta's 300-plus employees. Our team of housing developers, IT specialists, resident service coordinators, maintenance technicians, property managers, accountants, assisted living caregivers, construction managers – the list goes on and on – are all exceptional. Their occupations may be varied, but what they have in common is a deep and abiding commitment to the mission of Avesta: to improve lives and strengthen communities across Maine and New Hampshire.

I'm humbled by the opportunity to lead Avesta and work alongside this team. Please join me in giving them a round of applause.



I want to share a little about myself and how I came to care so deeply about this work.

I grew up in a working-class family in Warwick, Rhode Island. My mother, brother, sister, and I lived in a small cape – a home that my mom was able to afford working as a part-time nurse because my grandmother had purchased the home many years before and we inherited it. My grandparents had acquired the home thanks to support the government gave veterans after World War II. I'll come back to these points in a bit.

Fast forward: I was a senior in high school and had to select a community service project. I volunteered to work with Amos House, a homeless service organization. I had never before encountered a person experiencing homelessness, and this involvement forever changed my perspective.

Fast forward, and I landed an entry-level job at a nonprofit housing developer and manager in New York City. I fell in love with the work of managing permanent supportive housing for persons who had experienced homelessness, most of whom had a chronic mental or behavioral health illness. The overwhelming sense of gratitude residents showed was powerful. It was messy, hard, and confusing work, but it gave me purpose.

Fast forward again to Roxbury, Mass., and later in Rhode Island, where I worked on real estate development – pulling together Leaning Tower of Pisa-sized capital stacks. The gratification of shepherding the physical transformation of a blighted property that is a magnet for crime and community disorder into a beautiful community where families are safe and healthy is hard to beat.

And through these professional chapters, I was continuously

reminded of stark inequities, of the unconscionable racial disparities among those who are homeless – where Blacks are disproportionately at risk to be evicted, lose their home to foreclosure, and/or require emergency shelter.

I met so many hard-working people who, after obtaining an affordable apartment, were finally able to step off the crazy hamster wheel of just trying to make rent – and were able to go back to school and get a better-paying job. And I met families who were able to buy a home of their own after living in an affordable apartment.

I just learned that one of Avesta's long-time renters and client of our Homeownership and Financial Counseling program is under contract to buy a home that we just developed in Gray.

These examples are not rare, though also not frequent enough. The homeownership support available to my grandparents has largely evaporated. And the legacy of systemic racism in housing means that the security my mom and my siblings enjoyed is a privilege too many others do not have.

The personal experiences that drew me into this work are powerful reminders of why housing matters – but they are only part of the story. Just as important are the measurable outcomes that show what safe, stable housing can do for individuals and communities. Stories like these provide faces behind the data, research, and results that underscore Avesta's capacity and proven expertise to deliver housing solutions with measurable, lasting impact.

In my past, I have tracked metrics that correlated police activity with proximity to affordable housing built by nonprofits like Avesta. The data was conclusive – the closer you are to well-managed and high-

quality housing, the lower the crime rate and calls for emergency services.

Another interesting study from just a couple years ago looked at the Medicaid costs before and after a person with chronic health conditions obtained housing. The study found a 42% decrease in emergency department and inpatient stays... *and* they were now living in permanent housing and not in a shelter.

Avesta has pioneered the development of supportive housing in Maine in partnership with Preble Street, and we continue to lead the way, amplifying proven solutions to homelessness.

Avesta has developed housing from Farmington to Portland; from Old Orchard Beach to North Conway. Almost half of our apartments are set aside for older adults, and we have two assisted living communities helping residents age in place.

Today, over 4,000 people call an Avesta residence home. Our properties are as diverse as the places in which they are located: from single story duplexes to multi-floor apartment buildings. While I've only visited a couple dozen of our 100 properties so far, I've been blown away by the palpable feeling of relief that emanates from the community. When people feel safe and respected, they are kinder to themselves and to others.

Avesta's remarkable track record speaks for itself. I am inheriting the leadership of an organization at a moment in time when the sector we all so passionately care about is receiving more attention than ever before. And all the attention is not surprising. Maine needs 84,000 more homes – and this housing shortage impacts everyone. I give credit to my friend Nick Retsinas [former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development] for coining the

phrase, “Homes are where jobs go to sleep at night.”

Avesta has an important role to play as an outspoken implementor. As a practitioner, we know firsthand the policy and narrative changes that will move the dial, and we are committed to working with our diverse partners to expand housing choices.

Here in Maine, the near-term funding and regulatory landscape is positive – with the creation of the Housing Production Fund and the legislative changes that create a smoother glide path for permitting. Thank you to Governor Mills and the Maine state legislature for your support.

We are all aware of the federal landscape and the uncertainty that is in the air, which is all the more reason why we must invest in locally-driven solutions.

So, with this backdrop, I am committed to digging deep – to leading with clarity of purpose, with heart and with data. Maine and New Hampshire need Avesta, and we need all of you. Your support truly makes all the difference. Every person here tonight is a vital partner of Avesta’s, from our municipal partners to our financial institutions, from MaineHousing to our architects and general contractors.

Our accomplishments are your accomplishments too.

Thank you!