

## **Editorial: HUD secretary could learn from Sarasota**

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A visit to Sarasota Thursday by Ben Carson, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, should be a welcome one. It will provide the Sarasota Housing Authority with an opportunity to highlight its achievements in front of a Cabinet secretary and, most important, offer Carson the chance to listen and learn more about what it takes to successfully operate housing and social programs in the real world.

When William Russell, the authority's chief executive, went to Washington last year to work briefly as a special assistant, the authority's chairman said, "I think he'll bring some more expertise back to Sarasota ..."

If he's attentive during his visit this week, Carson should be able to take some more expertise back to Washington.

A HUD spokesman said one reason Carson is attracted to Sarasota is a program Russell created in 2015 to provide children living in public housing with books. Last year, Sarasota became one of 36 housing authorities to participate in a national program, "Book Rich Environment."

The program emphasizes the concept that, if children in public housing learn to read and do well in school, they are less likely to require public assistance as adults.

We hope there is time during Carson's tour for him to learn about key local initiatives that subscribe to the same belief.

For instance, foundations have helped create the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which partners with public schools and private nonprofits to promote early learning.

Foundations have also entered partnerships with the public and private sectors to promote the 2-Generation approach, embraced by Ascend at the Aspen Institute, that endeavors to end cyclical poverty by aiding not only children but their parents. This strategy enables low-income mothers and fathers, for example, to make advances in literacy, parenting and economic development through job training — either near their homes or at their children's schools.

Not every city has such private-sector assets, but the Housing Authority's community engagement and embrace of education and social services for its tenants could serve as a nationwide model. What's more, the local success demonstrates that providing learning opportunities for children and engaging parents in meaningful dialogue and job training are more appealing than draconian, mandatory work requirements and other punitive measures.

During his visit, we hope Carson is made aware of the challenges facing lower-income workers who need affordable housing in a market where real estate values are climbing and the sales of multimillion-dollar homes create the facade that everyone is living well in our sunny paradise. Funding for Section 8 vouchers, which help working people with low incomes obtain rental housing on the private market, is woefully inadequate — as demonstrated by the Housing Authority's perpetual waiting lists for qualified applicants.

Carson has stated that “the current system isn't working well.”

Indeed, there are failures. But they can be overcome, as the Sarasota authority has shown since its impressive recovery from near failure in 2005.

So, welcome to Sarasota, Secretary Carson. May your interest in a reading program enable you to learn valuable lessons about successful public housing and share them in Washington.