

PolicyMap: Achieving Legislative Objectives via Data Tools and Rich Reporting

Rhode Island Housing

Legislative Advocacy: State Advocacy

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ACHIEVING LEGISLATIVE OBJECTIVES VIA DATA TOOLS AND RICH REPORTING

RIHousing needed a new way to support our legislative efforts while engaging elected officials in housing issues, providing real-time data and information to support legislative leaders and advocating for housing policy issues. In assessing our past legislative efforts, we recognized a significant need for a deeper level of data and information and a way to integrate that data into our advocacy efforts. The development of our new PolicyMap tool allows us to support legislators and housing partners in their need for data and information and serves as the backbone of our own advocacy agenda.

Additionally, we've been able to support legislators, housing partners and advocates who can utilize the data and reporting to build a platform for their own legislative success. The new tool allows us to succinctly and plainly communicate the impact of our work to Rhode Island's state legislators, advocate for affordable housing opportunities statewide, illustrate where residents are feeling pressed by housing cost burdens, identify where housing stock is aging, and where previous RIHousing investment might be leveraged.

The ability to provide accurate and up-to-date data has been a game changer for RIHousing. Via a first-of-its-kind collaboration with PolicyMap, RIHousing has been able to successfully engage and inform our housing and advocacy partners—who can utilize this data as the platform for their own legislative outreach and engagement efforts.

NEED

At the start of each legislative session, our Government Relations team meets with legislators at the State House to brief them on our policy priorities for the year. These discussions almost always come back to the local needs in their district. *How does this issue affect their constituents? How will this program benefit the communities they represent?*

In the past, we'd pulled together a simple hard copy map of the affordable units in their community. Unfortunately, given limited data capacity and resources, even a simple handout was a huge undertaking – requiring many hours of tracking down data from numerous sources to create and print over 100 unique maps every year. Despite the work that went into producing the maps, these communications tools just weren't very engaging – legislators saw only the most basic information, and there was no way for them to dig deeper to understand their communities' housing challenges.

This wasn't the only issue we were grappling with. Internally, our capacity for spatial analysis was limited, and even a straightforward question such as “what areas have the highest number of cost-burdened homeowners?” or “what's the uptake of our programs in this district?” was difficult to respond to without the right tools. Our research team was spending hours finding the right data, getting it cleaned and formatted, and mapping it. We needed a more streamlined system.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

We had identified the need, but we were lacking a platform and a way to create awareness of and interest in the data. Fortunately, the timing was such that we were about to roll out a new website and had recently undertaken a complete re-branding effort, creating an opportunity to change how people saw our role in Rhode Island's housing conversation. We wanted elected officials, partners, housing

advocates and community members to see us as a resource for reliable information and thoughtful analysis about housing trends in the state.

We recognized that we could achieve these goals by creating a new web-based data and analysis tool – one that could quickly produce an easy-to-understand snapshot of key housing needs in communities across the state.

PROCESS

Once we settled on those goals, our team began looking for the best web-based platform to use that would allow us to map our own program data, plus public data from the Census and other sources. We needed something that would produce visually engaging, easy-to-read reports for legislators and it had to be easy to use and automated to the greatest extent possible.

Following research into various platforms and technologies, we selected PolicyMap, which offers all the functions we needed and allowed us to utilize their existing library of public datasets for mapping, eliminating the need to search for and format data. We could embed an interactive map on our webpage for the public to use and generate district reports to share with local, state, and federal policy-makers.

Over the course of about 3 months, we worked with the team at PolicyMap to decide which datasets should be featured on our web map and in our report. We defined which data would be available at which geographies, how the report data would be presented, and how end-users would navigate the tool. It was an iterative process, but after a few rounds of testing and improving, we were finally ready to launch the final product.

ROLL OUT

When we first launched the RIHousing PolicyMap tool, we shared it with a small group of community partners, municipal officials, and state legislators to hear their feedback. Across the board, the response was extremely positive. Everyone we spoke with agreed how valuable it was to have reliable, comprehensive data on housing at their fingertips. We promoted the new tool via our newly launched website, highlighting it on our “Research and Reporting” page as well as via communications and trainings for Constituent Services staff. The new tool was to be the foundation of this year’s annual State House Meet & Greet event, where we convene state legislators and an array of housing and advocacy partners. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, we had to cancel this year’s event, but we have continued to promote the tool via email and other communications efforts, and plan to spotlight the tool in our legislator engagement activities next session.

RESPONSE & BENEFITS

Feedback from state legislators has been overwhelmingly positive! Users have noted that the reports are easy to understand, visually engaging, and help them get new insight into the housing needs in their district. Legislators found it especially helpful to see their district’s data in the context of the entire state, whether through a map or through the interactive report. They noted that the custom reports summarize so many aspects of their district’s housing needs and provide the “deeper dive” that they were looking for. One legislator commented that the report really challenged a lot of public conceptions of her community, showing “in black and white” that even though the district was affluent, there were clear housing affordability challenges.

For us, the tool has made it easier to build a case for our programs at the State House. When our Government Relations team meets with state legislators, they can quickly pull up a map or report to show how constituents are directly benefiting from our programs and services. Staff can answer questions about the district's housing needs 'on the fly,' something we couldn't do with our old static maps. When our team went to Washington, DC earlier this year to meet with the Congressional Delegation, they used the reporting feature to show how housing needs of each congressional district has changed over time.

Our internal research and analysis process have been much easier and more efficient since implementing this new tool. Creating 100+ unique reports for our legislative outreach takes a few minutes of staff time vs a few weeks. We can respond to specific inquiries from legislators and partners about our program reach and community housing characteristics almost instantly. There's no more time-consuming mapping process – the whole library of data is available at almost any geographic level including state General Assembly districts, Congressional districts and municipalities.

We built the tool to support our state and federal advocacy, but it's also been a valuable resource for community members and the public. In our most recent round of Community Development Grants, we noted that a number of applicants utilized the PolicyMap tool to tailor their applications to the communities they serve. The page has received over 828 pageviews in 2020. Part of what makes it so valuable is that it's accessible – you don't need a GIS degree to explore the data and spot patterns.

INNOVATIVE AND IT'S REPLICABLE

It's worthy to note that RIHousing was the first HFA to work with PolicyMap, and they are now able to utilize our reports as 'templates' for other HFAs. PolicyMap has shared our collaboration at last year's NCSHA conference and featured it in their newsletter and website.

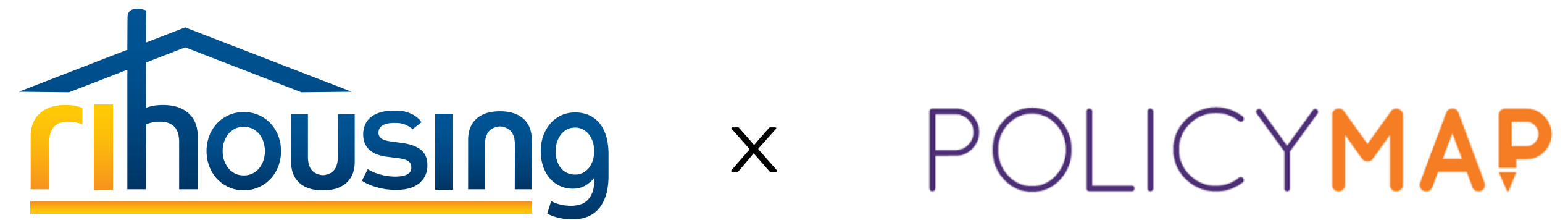
IMPACT

The RIHousing PolicyMap report is also used to test assumptions around affordable housing. One state representative required an accessible way to generate district-wide data – to argue, 'yes, we do need affordable housing investment here – there are low-income families, they are cost burdened, and the cost burden has grown over time'. *This reporting tool has allowed her to challenge perceptions of affluent communities in her district using the reality of what local data shows.*

The time staff saves on gathering data and creating mapping can now be used on strategy and developing our legislative priorities. The tool was particularly helpful in building support for several major housing initiatives proposed in the Governor's Housing Budget including a \$25 million housing bond and establishment of a permanent funding stream for the production and preservation of affordable housing- a first for the state. The Policy Mapping tool allowed legislators to easily see what affordable housing already existed in their communities, on maps overlaid with data on the housing cost burdens still facing local homeowners and renters.

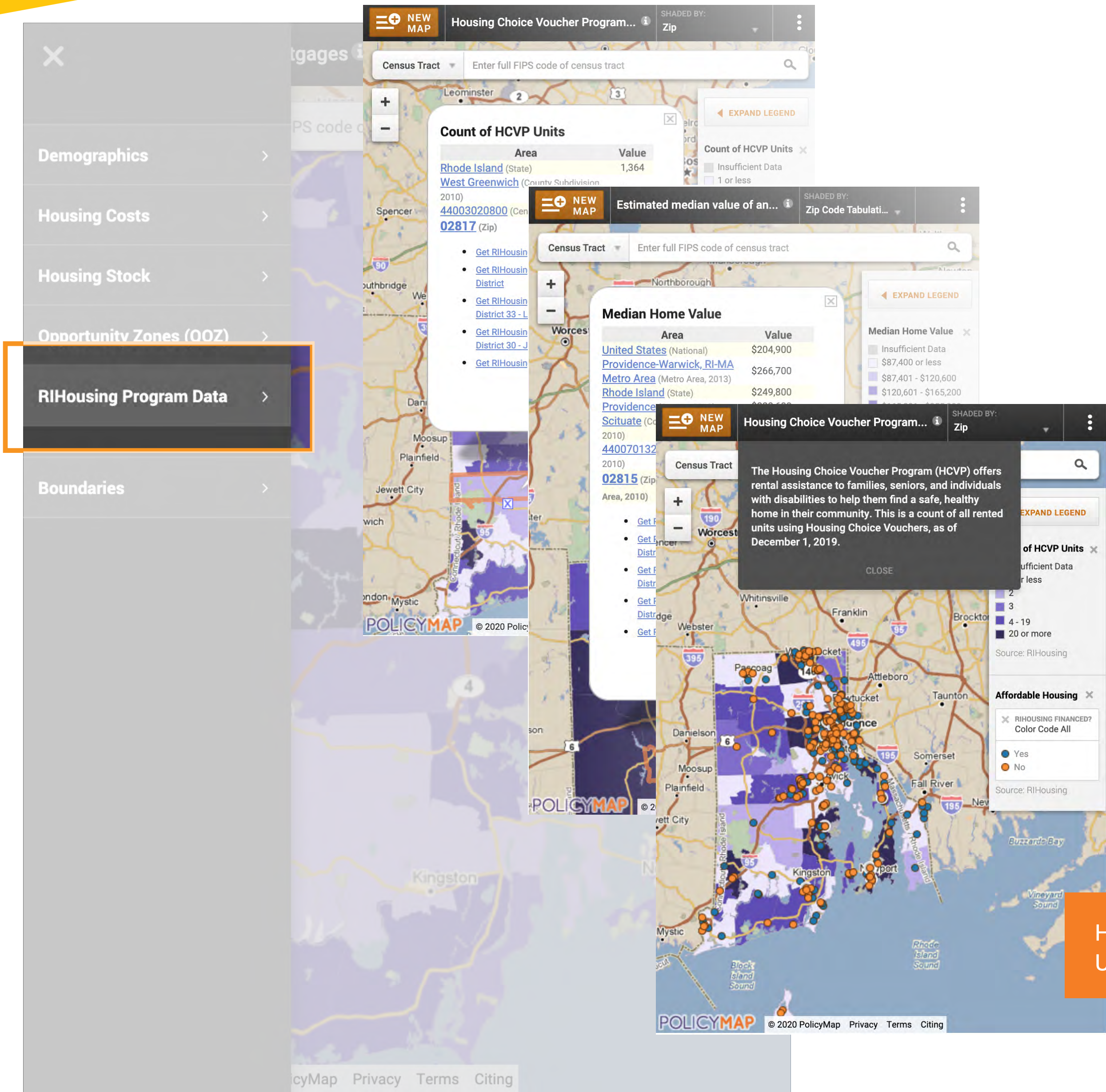
Overall, the effort has resulted in a significant amount of staff time saved in responding to data inquiries, helps strengthen our relationships with partners and state legislators, allows us to tap into new datasets, and improves our ability to anticipate, identify and prioritize legislative issues.

Check it out: <https://www.rihousing.com/policy-map/>



Legislative Advocacy: State Advocacy

- ✓ Accurate and up-to-date data and reports
- ✓ Integrate data into advocacy efforts
- ✓ Support legislators in their need for data and information



Users can generate a map to display:

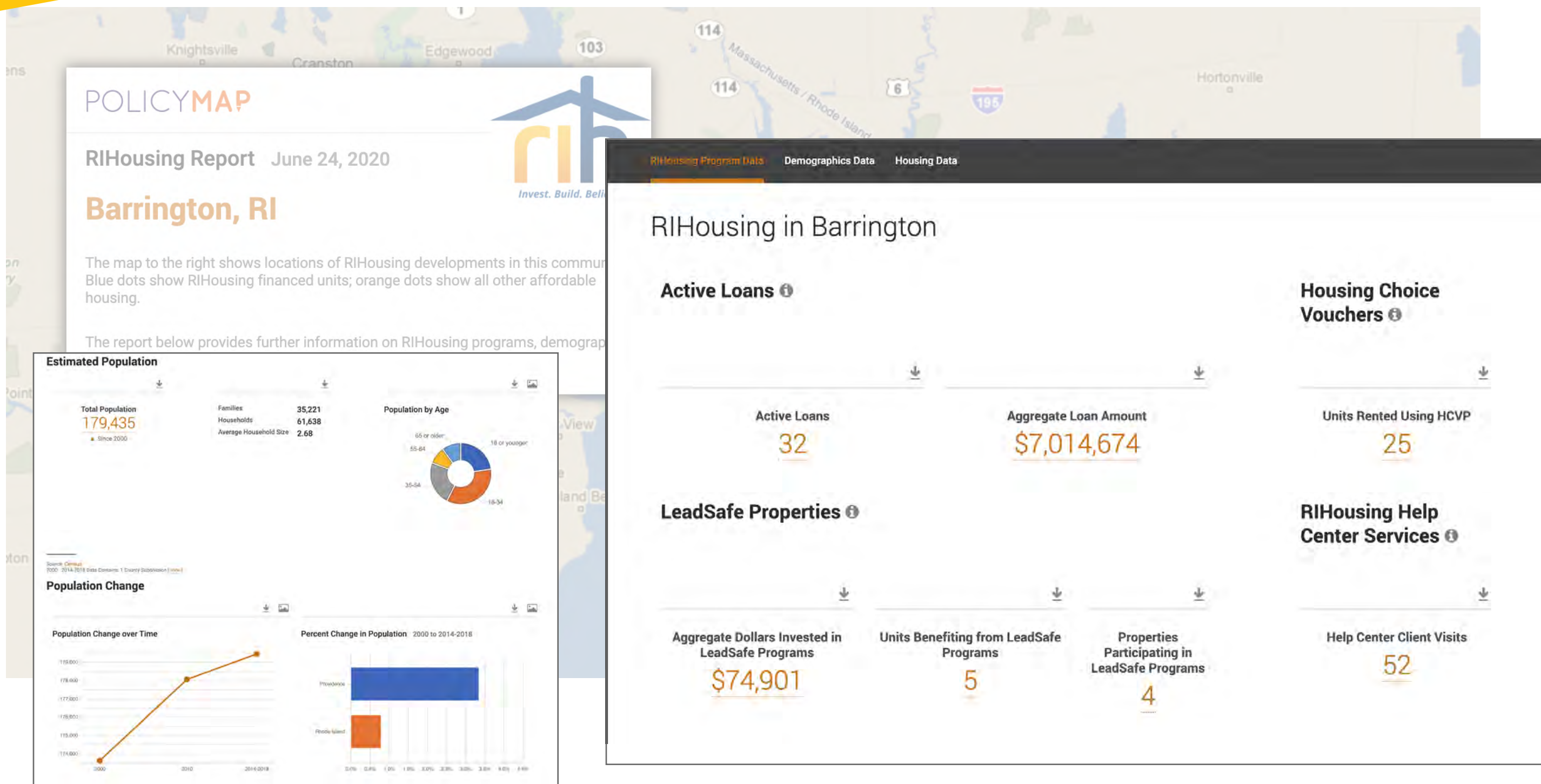
• **RIHOUSING'S PROGRAMS IN THEIR COMMUNITY**

- › Location of affordable housing properties, including units financed by RI-Housing and other subsidized housing, plus property characteristics such as number of units, total development costs, and subsidies used to finance
- › Number and value of RIHousing mortgages in their district/municipality/area
- › Number of residents participating in RIHousing's Housing Choice Voucher program, LeadSafe Homes Program, and foreclosure prevention programs
- › Datasets are updated once per year

• **THE COMMUNITY'S DISTINCT HOUSING NEEDS**

- › Median home value and rents
- › Number of cost burdened renters and homeowners
- › Housing types and housing quality
- › Demographic information like age, race, and poverty levels
- › These datasets reflect the most recent Census data available

Here's the view of affordable housing developments.
Users can click on any development to learn more.



POLICYMAP RIHOUSING REPORTS

Summary of RIHousing's Investments in the Area

- > Map of affordable housing
- > Constituents participating in our programs

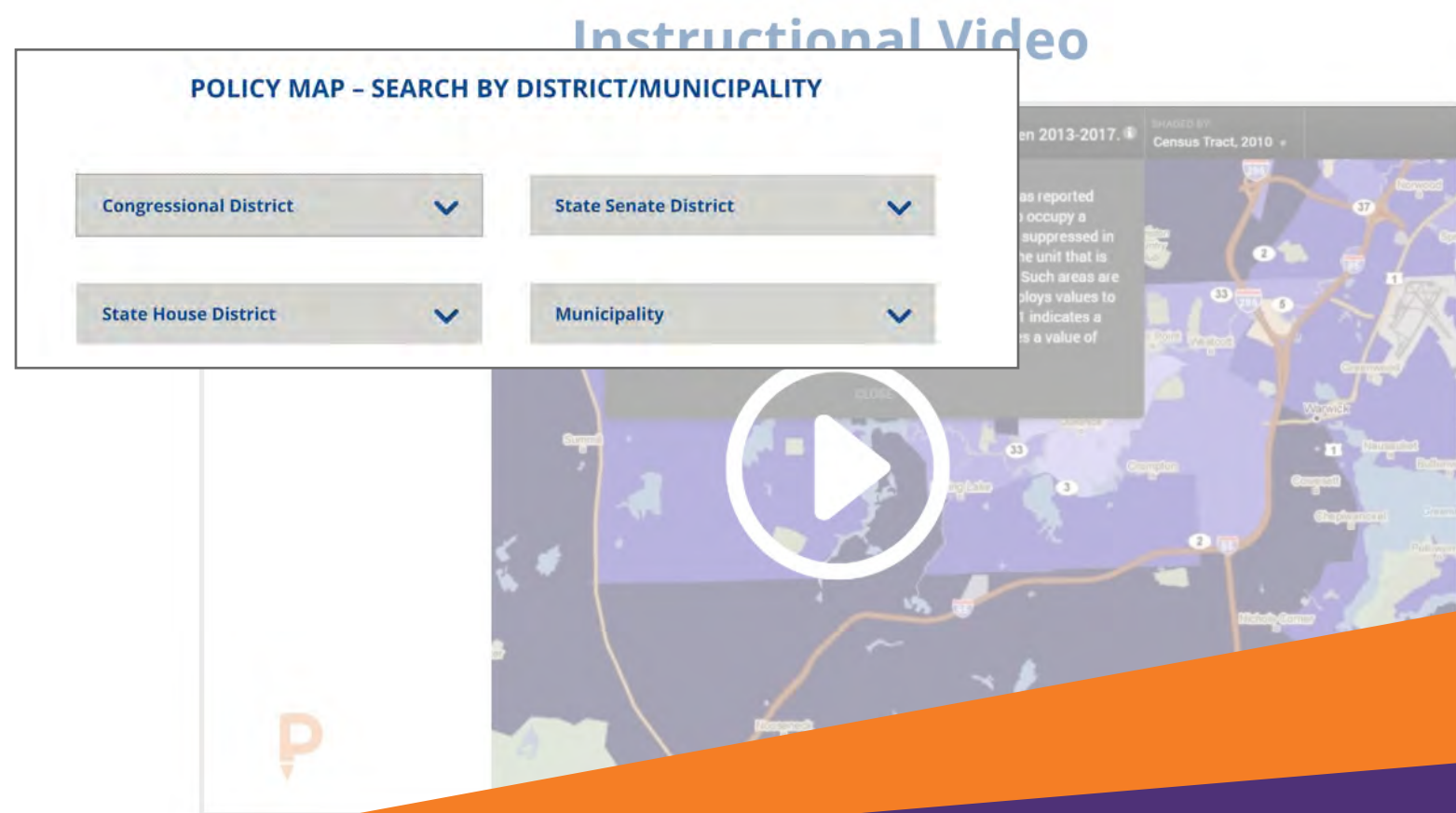
Interactive

Reports also represent the area's demographic, economic, and housing trends through interactive graphics. The hover-overs for each indicator show how the area featured in the report compares to the rest of the state, or how it's changed over time. Users can download the data and images to use in their own analysis or presentations. Report links are sharable, so anyone can share them and access them instantly through a browser.

- > Hover over the titles for a short description of each program
- > Show program participation change over time (in development)

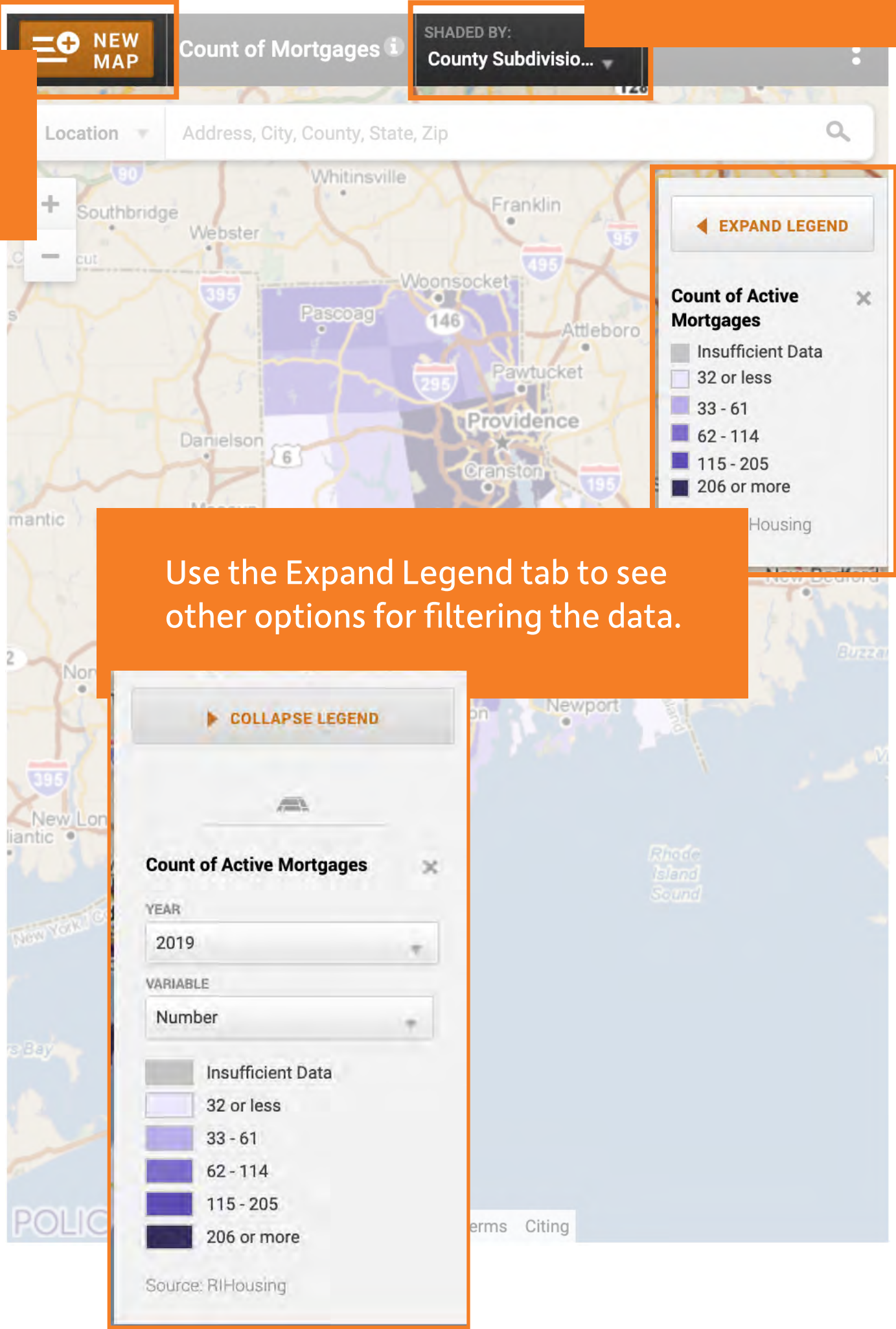
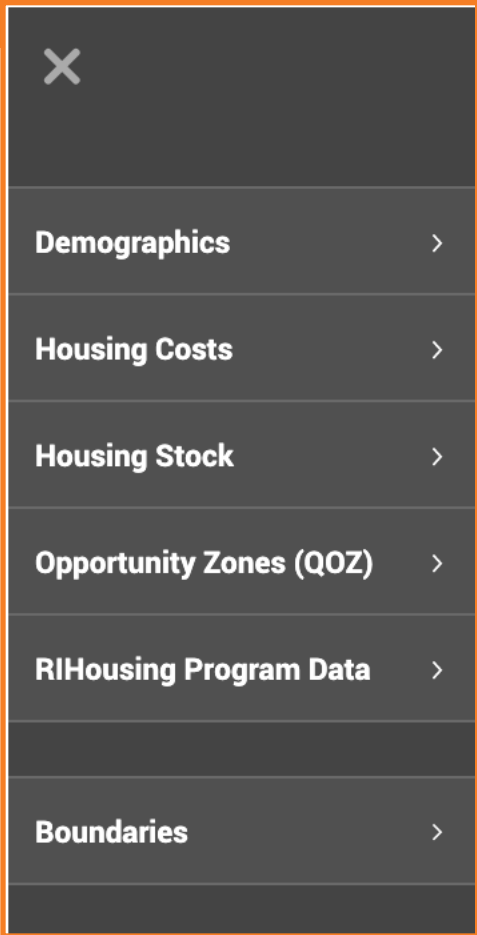
Easy-to-Use

- > Collaborate with PolicyMap to create a video to walk users through step-by-step instructions
- > Direct webpage to district reports to provide options for state and local officials to quickly find what they need without going through the map



Use the “Shaded By” tab to choose which geography to view.

Use the orange button on the top left to choose which dataset to display.

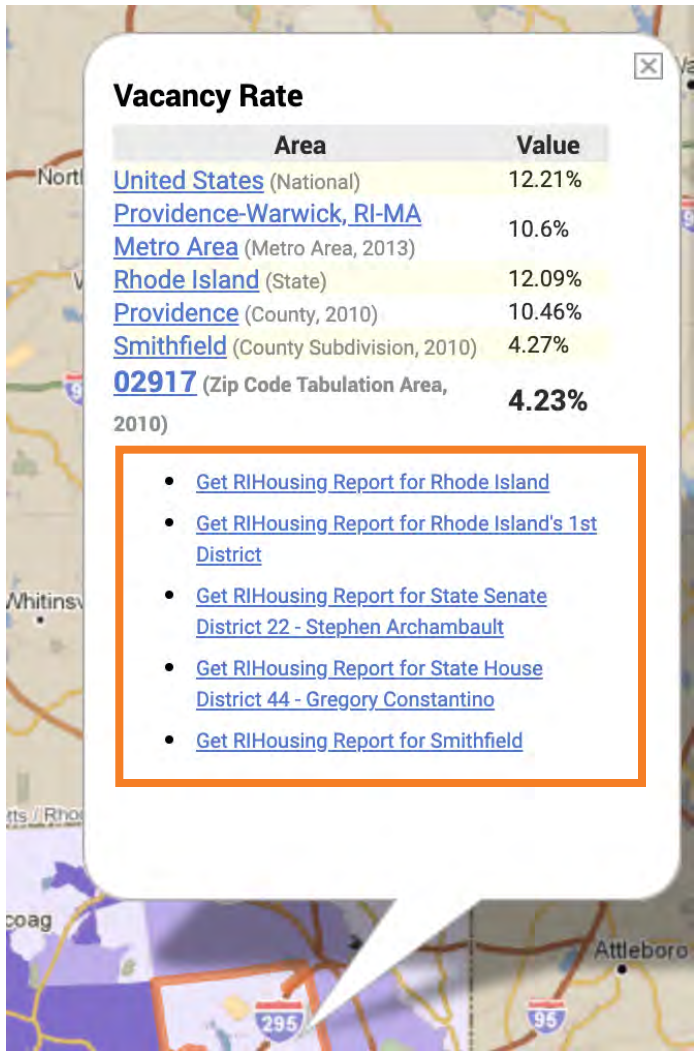


Use the Expand Legend tab to see other options for filtering the data.



GET SPECIFIC

The mapping feature is great for a quick snapshot of a single dataset. For a deeper dive into a specific area, users can pull a report by simply clicking on the location they’re interested in on the map. Users can choose to pull a report for the city, state House and Senate districts, Congressional districts, or the whole state. The report includes many of the same datasets as the widget, all in one place.



Buyers Owners Renters



Partners

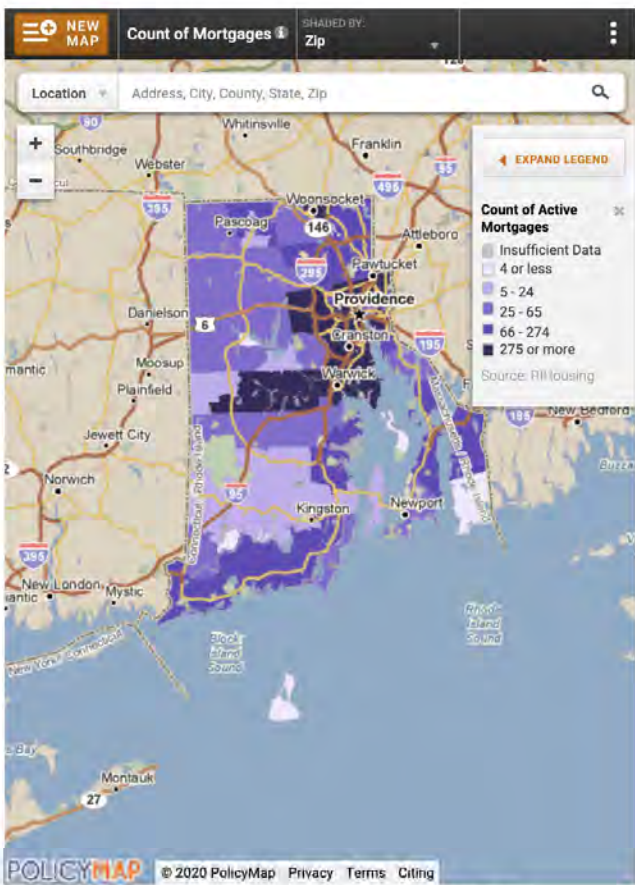
About Us

Mortgage Login



POLICY MAP

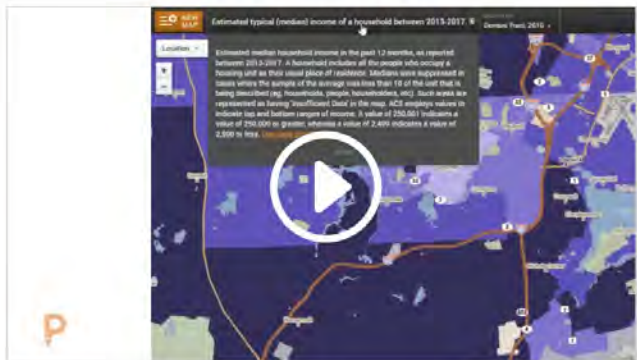
RIHousing's new mapping and reporting tool illustrates how our investments are meeting the needs of Rhode Island communities. Created by PolicyMap, the interactive mapping tool allows users to explore RIHousing program and local Census data.



RIHousing's New Mapping & Report Tool

- Users can also generate an interactive report summarizing RIHousing programs, demographic trends and housing conditions in their community.
- Users can explore current information and historical trends and see how their community compares to the rest of the state.

Instructional Video



SEARCH BY DISTRICT/MUNICIPALITY

Purpose of this tool

- Engaging with legislators: Our primary goal was to provide a new way for state and local legislators to explore our impact on their district. By combining our program data with demographic and housing data, we can demonstrate how our programs are meeting constituents' needs.
- Communicating with partners & public: The tool is a valuable resource for our partner organizations and community members as users can explore a wide range of data and create a snapshot of their community's housing needs.
- Informing our program planning: This tool allows RIHousing to quickly assess how our programs are distributed across the state, and how they align with local housing needs. This insight will strengthen our internal program planning and evaluation.

How to use this tool

1. Choose data: Click the orange "New Map" button in the top left corner to choose what indicator to show on the map.
 - a. Click the small "i" on the top toolbar to see the source information for the dataset.
 - b. Expand the legend on the right side to see additional options for visualizing the dataset.
2. Choose geography: Click the "Shaded By" tab on the top toolbar to select what geographic level to show on the map. Choose from block group, census tract, ZIP, county subdivisions (municipalities), Rhode Island House & Senate districts, and Congressional districts.
3. Choose a location: Click any area on the map to see data values and report options for that specific location.
 - a. Alternately, use the search bar in the top-left to find a specific address, ZIP code, or district.
4. Generate a report: Using the pop-up menu, choose which area to include in the report. Hover over the data and graphs in the report to learn more.

*Note that not all datasets are available at all geographies.

POLICYMAP IN RIHOUSING.COM

Buyers Owners Renters



Partners

About Us

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POLICY MAP – SEARCH BY DISTRICT/MUNICIPALITY

Congressional District

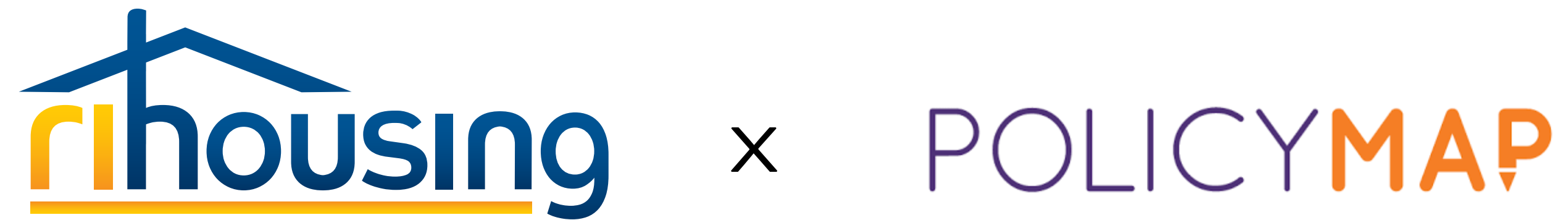
- [1st Congressional District – David Cicilline](#)
- [2nd Congressional District – James Langevin](#)

State Senate District

State House District

Municipality

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Barrington | Jamestown | Portsmouth |
| Bristol | Johnston | Providence |
| Burrillville | Lincoln | Richmond |
| Central Falls | Little Compton | Scituate |
| Charlestown | Middletown | Smithfield |
| Coventry | Narragansett | South Kingstown |
| Cranston | New Shoreham | Tiverton |
| Cumberland | Newport | Warren |
| East Greenwich | North Kingstown | Warwick |
| East Providence | North Providence | West Greenwich |
| Exeter | North Smithfield | West Warwick |
| Foster | Pawtucket | Westerly |
| Glocester | | Woonsocket |
| Hopkinton | | |



SEE FOR YOURSELF!

[TUTORIAL VIDEO](#)