

DC Family Policy Seminar

Quality Housing For All: Family and Community-Led Initiatives

Seminar Highlights

Mark Rom, Moderator
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Introduction

There is good news about the condition of public and low-income housing in the District of Columbia. The upward trajectory of the grades assessed to the DC Housing Authority (DCHA) indicates significant progress, with a promise of continued improvements. While much of the success is attributable to the work of the DCHA, they have not done it alone. The DCHA and other housing authorities around the country have realized that the creation of healthy neighborhoods necessitates collaboration with the citizens and families in the communities.

The goals of this seminar were (1) to educate participants about the trends in community-based housing initiatives in the District and nation and the benefits and challenges of residential involvement, and (2) to assist in identifying the community resources available to improve housing and neighborhoods for the families in the District.

Joanna Slaney, Assistant Director for State and Local Policy
The Enterprise Foundation Public Policy Office, Washington, DC

Slaney explained The Enterprise Foundation's role as a national intermediary that facilitates the provision of money and technical assistance from national foundations, businesses, and government agencies to local and community organizations. The Enterprise Foundation operates offices throughout the country that assist the affiliated community organizations. In Washington, DC, they also operate a public policy office.

The Enterprise Foundation has established a federal public policy office because (1) federal resources are necessary to the work of local affiliate agencies, and (2) Congress does not always recognize the importance of adequate housing. Slaney believes that, while there are champions of housing initiatives in the U.S. Congress, there are too few, and there is a lack of information about what is required to build and improve low-income housing. By sharing success stories and lessons learned, the staff of the policy office lobby for passage of federal policies and laws that will funnel money to local and community organizations.

Specific Programs

As an overview, Slaney described the federal sources of block grant funding and the federal regulations that are the focus of Enterprise's policy work. They are the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), the HOME funding grant, the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) building block, and the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). The CDBG is a flexible funding grant that is not restricted to the construction of physical housing units. These flexible funds enable local and community organizations to cover administrative costs, run on-site child care, and create and manage job training or other service programs.

These Highlights represent the opinions of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the beliefs of the Georgetown Public Policy Institute or the National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.

The CRA (Community Reinvestment Act) is a regulation that requires banks to invest money in the communities in which they exist. Under CRA, bank regulators check for patterns of lending in low-and moderate-income neighborhoods in which banks operate and give banks a reinvestment rating based on whether or not they pass up sound loans in poor communities. Banks with an unsatisfactory rating can have their applications for mergers, new branches, or acquisitions denied. This regulation is a particular focus because the Chairman of the Senate Banking Committee hopes to eliminate, or at least weaken, CRA. Without this law, investment in low-income neighborhoods would occur less frequently and many community improvement efforts would cease to exist.

In addition, Slaney indicated that Enterprise is targeting other funding sources for community-development work. For example, there is currently \$300 million from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants that has not been spent. The staff at Enterprise would like to see some of the money spent on programs that will improve access to child care, both on- and off-site, and on job creation efforts.

Summary

The Enterprise Foundation's policy staff work at establishing good policies and encouraging sufficient fund distribution to community development organizations. Slaney encouraged District residents to contact members of Congress and share their success stories because the decisions made on Capital Hill can have a huge impact. Stories about projects that work can increase the financial and technical resources available to community level workers.

In sum, the staff of the public policy office lobbies to eliminate the rules and regulations that deter the transfer of money and technical assistance to the workers at the community level. They seek to encourage and facilitate local-level involvement to improve housing and communities.

Greg Meeropol, M.Ed., TOP Grant Coordinator DC Housing Authority, Washington, DC

Meeropol commenced with a brief background of the DCHA. Currently, the DCHA manages 11,000 units with 30,000 residents. Of the total units, 90% are headed by females and 1/3 of the residents are children under the age of 18. The DCHA entered court-ordered receivership in the summer of 1995, following 15 years of neglect of the public housing communities. The Receiver, David Gilmore, who had previously been at the Boston and San Francisco housing authorities, was given the challenge of fixing the decaying physical structures and providing much-needed services. Mr. Gilmore believes that "if you help residents get involved where they live, they will start to care and will begin to invest in making it a better and safer place to live." The employment of residents near their homes provides the opportunity to help themselves and improve their communities.

Resident Employment and Apprenticeship Programs

The DCHA has several programs and initiatives that provide resident employment. One of Mr. Gilmore's first tasks, as mentioned previously, was to rebuild the physical structures. To achieve this, the DCHA established a construction force of 800 people, 30 percent of whom are public housing residents. Meeropol is pleased that the DCHA is currently the largest employer of public housing residents in the city. Under receivership, the DCHA has started strictly enforcing the Section 3 Federal Regulation, a regulation not previously enforced. Per the Section 3 Regulation, contractors awarded work on a public housing property must employ a certain percentage of the laborers from that property. If necessary, the contractor is required to provide training. Meeropol acknowledged that this regulation does deter some contractors from bidding on projects and that

the work may progress more slowly. However, he stated, over time this investment in the community will pay off.

Meeropol described two apprenticeship programs in which the DCHA is involved, the Benning Terrace Apprenticeship Program (for adults) and the NW Youth Working in Partnership program. Together, these programs provide approximately 100 jobs in construction, landscaping, painting, and graffiti removal. Additionally, the programs provide adults and adolescents with the skills necessary for later employment or entrance into a DCHA management program. The Do Your Best program provides summer jobs to 80 adolescent residents. Employment in administrative offices and on-site at the housing developments provides students with firsthand knowledge of housing authority work.

Housing Authority Grant Funded Programs

There are four HUD-funded Family Investment Centers (FIC) in the District. The “hub sites,” one in each quadrant, are fully accessible to all residents and provide one-stop shops for services and programs, including job training and counseling, tutoring, computer training, family services, and drug treatment. Because they are staffed by housing residents and local community partners, these centers provide additional resident employment opportunities. At the conclusion of the 2-year grants, the DCHA hopes that the residents and their community partners will run these centers. The housing authority envisions that the community partners will handle fundraising and the residents will prioritize, establish, and manage the programs. The DCHA FIC employs 40 residents serving approximately 400 people per month. These centers are located at Potomac Gardens (S.W.), Garfield Terrace (N.W.), East Capital Dwellings (N.E.), and Woodland Terrace (S.E.).

The Drug Elimination Program is a HUD-funded grant program that uses social services and policing to stop crime and substance abuse in and around public housing. The funds are spent on extra law enforcement, investigators, out-of-school children's programs, and tutoring and educational programs. The 1997 program established service providers on-site at all but one of the public housing sites. Resident involvement is essential to the success of these programs. The residents assist in the planning and provision of the drug treatment, intervention, and prevention programs.

The District of Columbia is one of only three cities that is participating in the HUD-funded Youth Violence Prevention Program. Through this demonstration project, residents receive services in violence prevention, intervention, and treatment, and training in the Community Resident Monitors Program. In addition, participants learn how to fundraise, write grants, and implement activities and programs in their neighborhoods. There are two partners in this initiative: the National Black Policeman's Association and the Howard University Center for Violence Prevention. Meeropol added that the DCHA considers this a fortunate partnership.

Meeropol coordinates the HUD-funded Tenant Opportunity Program, which provides financial assistance to 28 resident councils in the District. In striving for self-sufficiency, the residents use this money to build state-of-the-art offices and to receive training in money management, computer, and office skills. The flexible funding encourages residents to design property-specific programs that are tailored to their needs, not the needs of the housing authority. These programs range from after-school tutoring and Internet classes on the family properties to plant clubs and therapeutic programs on senior properties. Future plans include on-property, resident-owned and -managed laundry and vending businesses, dollar stores, and convenience stores. Meeropol praised the Chicago Housing Authority for their performance in this area and stated that the DCHA hopes to emulate their success.

The DCHA coordinates with three resident councils in the District's Southwest quadrant. These resident councils designed their own pre-occupancy orientation programs for new residents, many of whom are single mothers and could benefit from training in home-care and basic safety and living skills. The DCHA and resident councils coordinate with local police and other neighborhood agencies to provide information on bus schedules, safety, and area schools to new residents.

Home Ownership

Because Mr. Gilmore believes that there is no better way to create a climate of investment and involvement on the part of residents, he is working to expand their home ownership opportunities. There are currently three properties where this is possible: Montana Terrace in Northeast, James Creek in Southwest, and Valley Green/Sky Tower in Southeast.

Regionalization

One of Mr. Gilmore's final objectives is to "regionalize" the DCHA by creating three separate housing authorities located in public housing properties throughout the city. He aims to provide traditional services at the community level and eliminate the need to travel to the central office downtown. In fact, the central office will become a "grants management shop" where the DCHA and residents will work to monitor grants and identify additional funding sources. The DCHA is particularly interested in establishing more partnerships with corporate and private organizations.

The Future

In conclusion, Meeropol discussed the future of the DCHA and the receivership. Receivership ends when an agency receives a HUD score above 70 for 2 consecutive years (on a scale of 0 to 100). Last year the score was 79, and indicators are that the score to be awarded in October 1999 will be even higher. Therefore, the DCHA is planning for the transition and establishing a blueprint for the next year under receivership and beyond. Specifically, Mr. Gilmore will work to maintain the current employment programs and continue to provide opportunities for resident involvement.

Meeropol stated that, while the crisis has passed, the DCHA is cognizant that there is a tremendous amount of work still to do. He stressed that this work requires the continued input, enthusiasm, and work of the residents.

Question and Answer Session

Question: Given that housing is correlated with education, employment, and access to health care (specifically for the mentally ill), has The Enterprise Foundation established any collaborative arrangements with other organizations to simultaneously address these issues?

Yvonne Keyes, Homeless Advocate

Answer: The role at Enterprise is unique in that we do not do the building work, rather we facilitate and encourage the transfer of money and technology to the local community-based organizations who do build the housing. There is an awareness of the inter-related nature of all of those issues you raised, and of the important role housing plays in service provision. I cannot speak for our affiliate groups and any collaborative arrangements they may have established, but we do strive to take a comprehensive approach in improving communities.

Joanna Slaney

Q: I would like to address two issues that relate to the stock of affordable rental housing. First, while the emphasis on home ownership is wonderful, there are people who do not want to own a

home. Is there any information available on work being done that attempts to increase the stock of adequate affordable rental properties? Regarding federal funding, TAP (the Tenant Assistance Program) will be gone at the end of the fiscal year, and Section VIII cannot accommodate everyone. Those whom Section VIII cannot accommodate will expand the ranks of the homeless. My question: is anyone aware of an attempt to make available, not Section VIII subsidies, but local subsidies to replace the TAP gap? Also, is there anyone in the community development area who is developing livable rental properties?

Mary Ann Luby, Legal Clinic for the Homeless

A: When I worked for Senator Braun we addressed this issue. First, we fought to keep preservation money in the budget and to stop the removal of affordable rental properties from the market. Unfortunately, we were not all that successful, and many landlords who were required to provide affordable housing raised the rents as soon as they had fulfilled their 20-year commitment. We are also working on increasing the low-income housing tax credit from \$1.25 to \$1.75 per capita. Raising the low-income housing tax credit had a lot of support, but it was not attached to a tax bill, so it floundered. I believe that people are aware of the need for affordable rental properties, but because “home ownership is sexier,” it can be a challenge to prioritize this.

Joanna Slaney

Q: Concerning this topic, through its property disposition program, HUD holds auctions for the sales of some of its properties to private buyers. A recent law allows local governments to take these properties outside of the auction. Is the Receiver interested in creating a public-private partnership with local resident groups or nonprofit intermediaries to purchase and rehabilitate some of these properties and create more affordable rental housing?

Michael Diamond, Georgetown University Law Center

A: One of the members of the Cabinet would be better suited to answer the question, but my inclination is that the answer is “no.” Our hands are full with the current stock of housing, and the Receiver is trying to unload some of the properties we have.

Greg Meeropol

Q: Greg, how is your office addressing the flight of residents to southern Maryland and northern Virginia, and what is being done about the abandoned homes and buildings left behind? If there is redevelopment in those areas, and if it is in the form of block grants, will there be input from District residents?

James Shind, National Child Day Care Association

A: I cannot speak to the rehabilitation of private properties. The DCHA planning and construction crews are slowly rebuilding all abandoned public housing properties according to a pre-arranged time schedule. The extent of rehabilitation varies: at some properties the basic structure is solid and the frame needs to be rebuilt, while elsewhere the process is essentially a complete rebuild. The displaced residents and resident councils were consulted regarding the appearance and design of the redevelopment projects and our office is still receiving their input.

Greg Meeropol

Q: Mr. Meeropol, I appreciate the enthusiasm on your part to involve public housing residents. I would like to address the major legislation passed last year that could transform the residency requirements and distribution of public and assisted housing. The public housing contingency plan is one of the major avenues available to see how this all plays out. I would like to hear your thoughts on how the DC Housing Authority will include residents in the development of that plan over the upcoming months.

Linda Couch, National Low Income Housing Coalition

A: Mr. Gilmore emphasizes that we do not want to deny anyone the opportunity to live in public housing. With that as a basic tenet, we will continue to work with residents who are willing to participate as active, positive members of the community. However, there are a lot of problems of theft, vandalism, and rent collection in many of the buildings. Currently, our rent collection is only at 85%, and that is up from 65%. While we do not want to evict residents, there must be an establishment of minimum standards, and a requirement that residents meet them. The DCHA would much prefer to offer services and rental assistance in certain situations, but we must crack down on the violence, theft, and other things that are tearing apart the public housing properties. With regard to your specific question about resident involvement in the contingency plan, the staff at the regional offices will be responsible for disseminating the schedule to the residents and working with them on this project.

Greg Meeropol

Q: Resident councils are currently operating at different capacity levels in training programs and with regard to their ability to maintain housing stock. How will resident services address and (hopefully) eliminate differences in resident housing authorities' management abilities to ensure that people and programs do not slip through the cracks? Also, what is resident services going to do to assist those people who need extra assistance and time?

Yvette Tucker, Marshall Heights Community Development Organization

A: You are absolutely correct, there are huge variances in managerial abilities. I have also been troubled by the lack of training offered to many of these councils. In some situations, the councils received massive amounts of money with no financial training or established support systems. The DCHA has identified this as a huge problem and, in response, we are establishing the curriculums of two training programs. At the regional level, the training program will teach administrative skills such as agenda planning, time management, and leadership skills. Once residents have reached a minimum level of competency, they are eligible to meet with us at the main office to receive grant money and financial management training. I know this is a slow process and that can be frustrating, but we are working on it. Regarding individual residents, the staff of the regional offices will work with local managers to identify and work with tenants who are having difficulty paying rent or are struggling with other issues.

Greg Meeropol

Q: I am concerned that resident consultation often takes place with the same specific individuals—those who have a relationship with the housing authority. I would encourage the DCHA to include more people, because one involved resident board member is not enough. Also, I am concerned about the delays in getting the FIC sites operational. Who is being held accountable for delays such as the one in the East Capital area? I believe that accountability is a key issue when we discuss all of this money and the process of obtaining it.

Wallace Kirby, Marshall Heights Development Organization

A: Your first point is really important, we cannot just tap into one person and believe that he or she speaks for an entire organization. I think our regional offices need to better communicate meeting times and encourage more people to attend. I apologize because I am not certain about the status of the FIC sites, but the FIC coordinator, John Simmons, might be able to assist you. I agree with you that too many of the branch centers are behind in the set-up schedule, and I am concerned that we are 1 year into a 2-year grant and we are behind.

Greg Meeropol

Q: My question concerns households in DC where grandparents are raising their grandchildren. Are there any programs or policies that address these specific grandchildren/grandparent issues?

Allison Franz, Generations United

A: I do not believe that The Enterprise Foundation has looked at this issue specifically but I cannot speak for our more than 1,100 local partners. However, I do know that Senator Rockefeller's office has done work on this issue, and that people on Capital Hill are giving it a lot of thought.
Joanna Slaney

A: I cannot cite a specific written policy concerning this unique issue. However, we do work to accommodate these grandparents in properties that provide dual services for both seniors and youths. In particular, we will try to move grandparents from a senior property that does not allow children to live there into a property where they can.
Greg Meeropol

Commentary: I work on a family unification program that frequently addresses this issue. We often help grandparents fight for legal custody of children and then we work to provide Section VIII certificates for families. While this will not solve the problem, it is one way to address the issue. I estimate that 30 of our recent batch of 100 certificates went to grandparents who are serving as the custodial parent to their grandchildren.
Virginia Pryor, Child and Family Services Agency

Q: What are your thoughts and projections for the recently passed Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998, and how will it impact the flexibility of public housing?
Tim Harrison, American Public Welfare Association

A: The Enterprise Foundation does not work on public housing issues. But, based on my time working on the legislation, I believe there will be problems associated with it. There are some opportunities with the law and I believe we were relieved to get something as good as we did, but it does seem like a lot of the things got lost. One of the goals of the law was to encourage mixed-income housing, which is a great goal when there are unlimited resources. Unfortunately, an emphasis on mixed-income housing without increasing resources may push people out at the bottom end. It is not a bad bill, and we could have gotten a lot worse, but we need to worry about losing housing stock for very low-income people.
Joanna Slaney

Q: Are community-based organizations eligible to receive funding to work with Public Housing Authorities?
Theresa Harris, GSA

A: I am unaware of specifics but I am certain it is possible when working as a partnership. People at the federal level, and the state and local as well, love to help make public-private partnerships work well.
Joanna Slaney

Commentary: When housing authorities are working in partnership with local and community-based nonprofit organizations, do they have access to any of the 50,000 welfare-to-work vouchers?
Linda Couch, National Low Income Housing Coalition

Commentary: This type of collaboration is much of what we do. We want to build a community within HUD housing by promoting events such as winterizing houses and repairing plumbing. For example, our volunteers are currently working with Edgewood Terrace residents to remove graffiti and to build communities, trust, and friendships. There are a lot of these programs where residents and volunteers can help make these neighborhoods look like homes.
Richard Feldman, Jewish Community Center

Q: Ms. Slaney, in light of the importance of getting success stories heard on the Hill and the unique situation of nonrepresentation of the residents of the District, do you have any suggestions for people trying to get a voice at the federal level?

Katie Shoemaker, DC Family Policy Seminar

A: While District residents do not have a voting congressperson, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton is a vocal advocate on Capital Hill. Also, Hill staff in other offices are not discriminating in meeting with people. My recommendation is that you meet with staff, as it is much more difficult to set up a meeting with a member. These meetings enable you to describe success stories; stories are particularly compelling when they are of real people with names, faces, pictures, etc. District residents should strive to take advantage of their proximity to federal legislators. I would also recommend that you ask for something that will make a difference and is constructive and plausible.

Joanna Slaney

General Information: The Receiver holds public meetings on the first and third Thursdays of every month at 1:00 PM and 6:00 PM for both residents and nonresidents. The meetings are held at the DCHA office at 1133 North Capitol.