

## Organizing for Change in Affordable Housing

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There are groups of disenfranchised, vulnerable people whose survival depends upon the success of social change campaigns.

Within the affordable housing arena there are national, state and local organizations which profess the desire to provide safe, affordable housing for all people. However, when the workday is over it is residents who still remain to contend with success of government efforts or the fallout of the failure to accomplish the mission. It seems that the object of housing advocacy (the tenants) are a constant-Why then are they often excluded or prevented from participating in the process? If advocates for affordable housing believe that the people affected by their work are valuable and often times the very motivation for their hard work then advocates should also conclude that the same people must play a vital role in the process of working for social change. In fact, the advocate's agenda must begin to incorporate as a primary goal changing the traditional practice of making life changing decisions in a vacuum without considering the input of those directly affected by such decisions. To accomplish this task it is important to organize this population of people. The organizing of tenants in low-income housing requires educating, advocating and ultimately an organizing methodology that will help residents to challenge existing power relationships.

### Three Examples from New Castle County

Forming tenant associations is just one aspect of tenant organizing. There are examples of active tenant councils in three very distinctive communities in New Castle County. Each project has dynamic issues, but all have experienced hills and valleys along the path to procuring and preserving affordable housing.

### Hope VI-The Village of Eastlake

In the 2001-2002 issue of this publication readers were informed of the Hope VI Public Housing Program. "WHA [had] recently convened a Community Task Force and [had] established ambitious goals in the areas of education, family support, economic development, employment,



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community building, and community empowerment for the former residents and the revitalized Eastlake community." In spite of having been geographically dispersed the relocated residents were able to successfully form a tenant council. The past year has been plagued with challenges for the residents and the WHA/CTF members. Early on in the process it seemed that the residents were not present at the discussion table. The WHA/CTF contended that there had been significant outreach efforts to invite the tenants to meetings and other events.

The residents complained of not having the information or the help they were seeking. Residents were also looking for a more assertive role from the WHA/CTF, especially in the area of accommodating their disadvantage of being geographically scattered. Residents feared that time was passing and they still did not have a clear understanding of the requirements for returning to the project. It appeared that WHA/CTF was working with tentative re-occupancy criteria while awaiting input from the property owners/managers to provide a complete list of requirements. Only recently was a final re-admittance plan made available to tenants.

It was necessary that residents be required to complete a home buyers course to prepare them for the challenge of maintaining a home. Ideally, for residents, this past year would have been well spent with programs that targeted some of the other existing issues that would prevent re-admittance. For example: drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, job readiness and career training, credit counseling and other relative programs that were sited as a part of the CTF's original goals.

From the advocate's perspective this effort was to result in determining the criteria for re-admittance to the New Village of Eastlake, educate the former residents on the requirements, and help them correct any areas where they were found lacking; thereby positioning as many of the former residents as possible to re-enter the revitalized community.

This project has been a tremendous undertaking requiring a great deal of organization, communication and consistent effort; however if we measure the success by the number of residents currently scheduled to return to Village of Eastlake the Hope VI project would not fare well.

### **Lexington Green**

A tenant organizing effort in another community has been faced with some incredible obstacles. The residents at Lexington Green Apartments have had a duly elected tenant council for over a year. It was just about a year ago when the residents began working to be recognized as participants in the implementation of programs funded by a federal Drug Elimination Grant. The funds were made available to owners of federally subsidized properties in order to create security measures that would deter drug related activity. HUD regulations provided that residents have input in how the funds would be spent. However, Lexington residents complained that they were not made aware of the grant or their right to offer input on the implementation of programs.

After a fatal shooting on the property the resident council president spoke at a meeting of HUD officials and tenants from the region. At the meeting HUD officials were made aware of the combative attitudes and behavior that the residents were experiencing from some of the management staff. HUD officials from the Philadelphia Regional Office made commitments to get involved and better oversee this grant. In the interim there was a funding crisis and all operations of the council became restricted, in particular travel or long distance calls to the regional HUD office for follow-up and accountability.

Residents have grown tired of defeat in the fight for inclusion. Most have resorted to using legal services for each injustice that is perpetrated by management while others still use the tenant council as a vehicle of communication with the manager and owner of the property. Most recently residents are dealing with a series of unlawful entries and searches of their apartment units as well as continued unfair treatment by maintenance and management staff.

### **Greenfield Manor**

The residents at Greenfield Manor Apartments organized a resident council three years ago in order to save their homes. Residents were threatened with losing their homes when the property owner opted out of his contract with HUD. This too was also a battle for inclusion. Residents wanted to be a part of the meetings with HUD, the contract administrator, the county and the property owner. The tenant council was successful in finally attending one of the meetings however, they still felt that they had been left out of previous more important negotiations. The resident Council soon learned that tradition was a difficult

thing to change; while permitted to be present at the table they were not really welcome by all parties. In fact, the efforts for inclusions were thwarted by the giving of incorrect or conflicting information.

At the end of the opt-out process the residents were transferred from project-based to a tenant -based subsidy. Some residents reported that the transfer process could have been a bit smoother; specifically that NCCo inspectors and social workers could have been less argumentative and more helpful. Also some residents were affected negatively by incorrect rent calculations. The victory was that the residents won their right to remain in their units. The major defeat was that approximately 65 units of affordable housing were lost.

Residents were permitted to stay at the complex using enhanced vouchers. Enhanced voucher regulations allows for the landlord to receive higher rents for the units and for the resident to have the right to remain as long as the property is used as rental housing. In spite of these regulations, a year later the property owner proceeded to terminate the leases of the enhanced voucher holders contending that forthcoming renovations make the terminations necessary. More than a third of the remaining residents have been unable to find alternative affordable housing. They have decided to once again remain and fight to have the enhanced voucher regulations acknowledged and enforced. The resident Council is hopeful that this time they can fight the battle in court and legally secure their housing and ward off any future attempts by the landlord to end their tenancy.

Residents are concerned that even if they win the right to remain after the units are renovated they may still have to contend with poor maintenance practices. The tenant council is resilient and prepared to work to not only have a voice, but also to improve life for low income families at Greenfield.

### **Keep Organizing**

In light of the relentless challenges faced by these three Tenant Councils, it appears that the effort to organize the three groups of tenants have been unfruitful. However, at a closer examination it becomes evident that to have

organized and set out to make a change is in itself a victory. The problems in these communities are far from solved; but the residents have challenged the system. These experiences revealed some of the weaknesses of federal, state and municipal housing agencies as well as those who are in business to protect the tenants.

The conclusion is what was already evident; that is the system is far from perfect. If we continue conducting business traditionally then we cannot expect a better outcome. We must be willing to shake things up a bit perhaps even a lot.

The grassroots organizations are off to a good start: they are organizing, educating and helping tenants to realize their power and utilize it effectively. Tenants are using the legal and political systems to achieve their goals. In order to be included on all levels of the process to improve the affordable housing situation new partnerships must be formed. Rhetorically, these types of relationships already exist. Imagine a day when state agencies (Attorney General, Human Relations, Consumer Protection) conduct community education events. Or perhaps a housing authority piloting a program to promote communication between property owners and resident groups. Dare we dream of a coalition of advocates, agencies, and tenants bold enough to hold the federal government, specifically HUD, accountable for its policies and practices and powerful enough to get housing on the top ten list in Washington, D.C.

These may be overly ambitious dreams, but at this stage any creative measure taken to improve the quality and availability of affordable rental housing is better than continuing on our current path. One doable positive step is for Congress to take action to rectify all of the issues surrounding the funding crisis, in particular the inconsistent auditing guidelines. Grant monies have been frozen so long that many advocacy and tenant groups have had to shut down. Without the work that many of these groups are/were doing changing the affordable rental housing situation might just remain a dream. In the meantime, we'll keep right on organizing tenants to work for future change.