

DENVER HOUSING AUTHORITY

CASE STUDY



The Denver Housing Authority (DHA) is a quasi-municipal institution that provides affordable housing to very low, low, and moderate-income families in the City and County of Denver, Colorado. Through a mix of authority-owned units and authority-managed housing vouchers for use in the private rental market, DHA provides housing for over 26,000 people, making it the largest landlord in Denver. The authority's recent experiences with HOPE VI redevelopment projects show how a local agency can effectively use public engagement and outreach to incorporate community health needs and generate community support.



Learn more by reading "[Housing Affordability as Preventive Medicine: A Porch Light Debate about the Denver Housing Authority.](#)"



History and Hope

The development of public housing in the United States is closely tied to “slum clearance” and demolition.¹ Beginning in the middle of the 20th century, in low-income neighborhoods around the country, buildings deemed “blighted” or otherwise sub-standard were torn down to make way for new construction, including new public housing projects.

Many of these early public housing complexes would become the next generation’s “slums.” In the mid-1990s, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development launched the HOPE VI program to help local housing authorities redevelop “severely distressed” public housing. Motivated by the growing perception that older public housing complexes were poorly designed and led to concentrations of poverty, HOPE VI helped fund the replacement of these older units with redesigned developments that housed residents with a wide mix of income levels.²

With funding from HOPE VI, the Denver Housing Authority has spent the past 20 years redeveloping several of its older housing complexes. One of the earliest of DHA’s HOPE VI-funded redevelopments was Curtis Park, in the city’s Five Points neighborhood. Five Points, sometimes referred to as “the Harlem of the West,” was a historically African American and Hispanic neighborhood with a long and troubling history of housing demolition backed by city and federal urban renewal policies.

The Curtis Park HOPE VI project called for more demolition: the removal of 200 units of public housing (ultimately to be replaced with 300 units of mixed-income housing), calling to mind for many residents the urban renewal programs of the past. In addition, some public land was sold to private developers. As the project progressed, housing costs in the area rose as the market in the wider Denver area heated up. Although the redevelopment may have improved housing conditions for residents, many of the original residents of Curtis Park did not return. Additionally, the confluence of local history, housing market dynamics, and the rollout of the Curtis Park Hope VI project rekindled community concerns about redevelopment and its role in exacerbating gentrification and displacement.





Community Engagement

“When it came to Mariposa, we pulled out all the stops. ... You need to have buy-in. Our new projects belong to the community because they serve a need that was identified by the community.”

– Lynne Picard, DHA director of workforce development and community initiatives³

After Curtis Park, the Denver Housing Authority decided it would focus more on community and resident engagement when it began to plan its next HOPE VI redevelopment: the South Lincoln Homes, a 15-acre site in the La Alma/Lincoln Park area. Originally built in 1953, this complex was showing its age, and many residents complained that they felt unsafe in the neighborhood. Nonetheless, the residents felt a deep connection to their community, which was located near downtown and home to a mix of working-class families, immigrants, and artists.

The South Lincoln Homes redevelopment called for demolishing 250 existing units and replacing them with a new development (ultimately called Mariposa) that would increase the density and number of units and would include commercial and open spaces. An explicit, major goal of the project was neighborhood revitalization. The redevelopment area was adjacent to a station on Denver’s then-expanding light rail service.

DHA understood that proximity to a light rail stop and a redeveloped public housing complex could prime the neighborhood for additional investments and development. The authority wanted to make sure that current residents of public housing and the wider neighborhood would benefit from the potential changes brought on by its work.

For DHA, the success of this project depended on effectively engaging both the residents of the soon-to-be-demolished public housing and the broader community in its project planning and implementation. The authority was particularly concerned with ensuring that residents had input into how the units were developed, and that there was ongoing communication so residents who wanted to return when the building was complete could do so.

DHA began the project by surveying existing residents about their needs. One of the findings of this initial survey was that the residents had very high levels of chronic disease and, accordingly, high health needs. After reviewing the responses, DHA decided that it needed to place more emphasis on health in its redevelopment. It hired a firm to conduct a rapid health impact assessment, which it used to set a baseline for current public housing residents and learn more about community needs.

Although the staff at DHA had long recognized that their residents had high health needs, the process of engaging residents made them think about how they could more actively support better health through policies and programs that were not directly connected to health care. Through community input they included metrics such as access to green space, child care, and physical activity to evaluate the impacts of their redevelopment.

As they worked to incorporate their findings into the redevelopment plan, DHA staff also held meetings with residents to solicit input into the process. They found, however, that many residents remained unengaged. “Residents come to our meetings, but you often see the same people, and we know that they’re not necessarily representative of everyone,” said Lynne Picard, director of workforce development and community initiatives.⁴



One year into the process, DHA outreach staff were still struggling to reach tenants who lacked the time to attend public meetings, or who did not feel comfortable doing so. One staff person mused that it would be great if they could have a lemonade stand outside the housing complex.

So they did. Authority staff set up a table offering cold lemonade on hot Denver afternoons. Many residents with children stopped by, and the informal setting was more welcoming to people who felt uncomfortable in the official meetings. The lemonade stand was moved to different buildings over the course of the summer, providing multiple opportunities for residents to talk informally with the DHA staff about the designs that were being contemplated for the redevelopment project. By the end of planning the South Lincoln/Mariposa Redevelopment, DHA had held more than 200 meetings and informal gatherings to get input from residents.



Responding to Community Input

As important as it is that DHA worked to improve its community engagement practices, this engagement truly mattered because DHA was open to revising and adapting its plans based on the input it received. This openness to change played out on scales large and small.

For example, as the Mariposa development progressed, DHA staff realized that, although they were replacing units from the prior development, the new units were smaller. American families are smaller today than 50 years ago, and smaller units could accommodate most returning residents. But there was 1 family from the original development with 10 children. Because they were in communication with this family and knew they wanted to return, DHA staff made sure to build a 5-bedroom townhouse so the family would have a place in the new development. Dion Reisbeck, program manager, described how important this was, noting this “sort of goodwill commitment to live up to our promises and expectations to community helps us do our work.”⁵

This commitment showed up in larger ways as well. After hearing from residents that they were concerned about housing stability and wanted their kids to be able to attend the same schools during construction, the authority decided to conduct the redevelopment in phases. Phase 1 was built on land owned by the city of Denver, which served as replacement housing for existing residents before any units were demolished. This decision meant the project took longer and cost more, but in the end, 50% of South Lincoln families returned to the redevelopment, dramatically higher than the 24% national average for HOPE VI projects.



Going Beyond

For many, this would be a success story. But 7 years into the South Lincoln redevelopment, DHA is planning another redevelopment of a much larger public housing site in an area called Sun Valley. Here, DHA is continuing to use some of the outreach strategies that were developed in South Lincoln, and is incorporating new ones.

In Sun Valley, for example, the authority has hired residents to serve as community connectors. As DHA's Shaina Burkett said, "The lemonade stand is great, but we think you can take outreach a step further by having community members who are already advocates and training them to listen to their neighbors and work with them."⁶ These residents are paid by the authority and have been trained to engage with their neighbors, identify needs, and work within their community to train other residents as advocates. The connectors have formed a Sun Valley community organization, and they host community meetings to develop plans. But they're also available at the laundromat or in the park to hear the concerns of residents and bring them to DHA. Although the impetus for creating this position was the redevelopment, Burkett notes, "It's really taken off a lot faster and in more layers than I thought. I think the concept of community connectors is great and should be in every community."

Unfortunately, DHA may ultimately be a victim of its own success. DHA's redevelopment of its public housing units may be stimulating gentrification in the neighborhoods where its residents live. As Jami Duffy, executive director of Youth on Record, a nonprofit that occupies commercial space in the Mariposa redevelopment, put it, "The city is focused on Sun Valley like hawks. They are waiting for the redevelopment to happen, and then the developers will move in."⁷

"We want folks who start with the planning effort to be around to feel development benefits. We know there is an impact when there is a large-scale development in the community, and we're trying to do this without displacement or gentrification."

– Ryan Tobin, DHA's director of real estate development⁸

DHA does not have sufficient capacity to house all the qualifying low-income families in the city, and certainly could not stretch to cover those who do not qualify for public housing but are nonetheless being squeezed out by rapidly rising costs. As one of the Mariposa community residents said, "Maybe anywhere DHA goes, a community land trust has to go as well." DHA may be the largest landlord in Denver, but its ability to mitigate against market forces in a city with fast-rising housing costs is limited.

Despite these very real limitations, the work of the Denver Housing Authority offers a glimpse into the types of programs and practices that can be utilized to improve healthy housing. Although health was not the primary reason that DHA engaged in community outreach, its efforts illuminated ways that the authority could take steps to ensure greater housing stability, which has its own health benefits, as well as other practices that would improve the health and well-being of both public housing residents and members of the larger community.



Endnotes

1. Integrating the Inner City
2. Housing Policy in the United States, Alex F. Schwartz, Routledge 2014 p 190
3. Interview with Lynne Picard, conducted by Saneta deVuono-powell 04 14 2016.
4. Interview with Lynne Picard, conducted by Saneta deVuono-powell 07 25 2016.
5. Interview with Dion Reisbeck, conducted by Saneta deVuono-powell 07 25 2016.
6. Interview with Shaina Burkett, conducted by Saneta deVuono-powell 02 16 2018.
7. Interview with Jami Duffy conducted by Saneta deVuono-powell 07 27 2016.
8. Interview with Ryan Tobin, conducted by Saneta deVuono-powell 06 14 2017.

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