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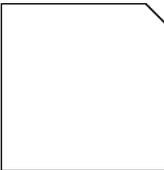
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U.S. public housing appears to be an endangered resource

by Charles Hallman
Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder
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Hidden housing crisis strikes â€œinvisible peopleâ€™

Illustration by Christopher E. Harrison
Credit: Illustration by Christopher E. Harrison

The U.S. government passed the Housing Act of 1949 that created public subsidized housing and guaranteed every citizen the right to a decent place to live. Now, over a half-century later, low-income Americans are facing a public housing crisis that remains â€œhiddenâ€ under the foreclosure issue that is getting more attention.

Is that 1949 guarantee of decent housing for everyone in this country soon expiring?

â€œThese are the invisible people of our population,â€ noted National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) Legal Program Director Tiffany Gardner. The New York-based organization â€œworks with public housing communities in particular,â€ she added. â€œThey are not going to be on the evening news.

â€œThe mortgage crisis is affecting millions of Americans,â€ Gardner noted, â€œbut we donâ€™t think it impacts the public housing community. The pressure on that community is coming from other areas.â€ NESRI identified the primary pressure sources as:

- 1) The demolition of public housing units under the federal HOPE VI program, which began in 1992, initially designed to improve the lives of public housing residents. â€œThe way we look at the destruction of public housing in this country is not that you are destroying a home, but also destroying communities,â€ Gardner pointed out.
- 2) The loss of more than 300,000 privately-owned, federally subsidized, multi-family housing units since the Title VI preservation program was eliminated in 1996.
- 3) A \$6.5 billion shortfall in the fiscal year 2009 budget submitted by the Bush Administration for Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and its Section 8 program, which could lead to another 500,000 low-income apartments lost. This could potentially displace 300,000 families. â€œThe Section 8 program has been undercut since [former president Ronald] Reagan, who [first] cut the HUD budget,â€ said Gardner.

Housing advocates predicted when the HOPE program first emerged that it would negatively affect â€œhundreds of thousands of residents of public housing,â€ Gardner recalled. â€œNow we have had several years of the policy, and you see that this is exactly whatâ€™s happening. The idea that the residents of public housing would come back or find alternative housing â€œthat hasnâ€™t worked out.â€

Gardner calls the destruction of whole communities â€œa real crisis situation [and] the first threat we see to public housing,â€ she continued.

The public housing crisis should be a key issue in this yearâ€™s presidential campaign because it directly deals with poverty, Gardner suggested. â€œIt is a crucial issue in this country in respect to domestic policy,â€ she said, adding that it affects the elderly, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, poor and working-class citizens along with Whites.

â€œWhen you think about public housing, Section 8 and federally funded programs that provide housing for people, we are really talking about the most vulnerable people of our society,â€ Gardner said.

NESRI is currently lobbying Congress to hold public hearings that would address the public housing issue in such cities as New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Minneapolis â€œurban areas where HUDâ€™s policies are considered to have been particularly destructive â€œas well as a joint congressional hearing in Washington, D.C.

The Hollman vs. Cisneros Consent Decree in 1995, which settled a 1992 class action lawsuit against city and federal housing agencies over the concentration of poor people in North Minneapolis, later led to the demolition of the Sumner Field public housing project.

According to Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) spokesman Bob Boyd, 770 units were demolished and 514 families made eligible for relocation. Of these, 83 families purchased homes elsewhere and did not return; 164 families found alternative housing through Section 8; 209 families moved into other public housing, including suburban units that were developed because of the Hollman lawsuit; and 23 families left public housing altogether.

The MPHA has no information on 35 other families that either were no longer eligible, evicted, or left without giving any indication of where they were relocating.

Boyd added that 373 families â€œwere offered an opportunity to return [to public housing]. Only 37 elected to return to the new Heritage Park; 20 are African American, 14 are Southeast Asian, and three are Caucasian.â€ Three other single households, two Blacks and one Asian, moved into Heritage Commons, MPHAâ€™s senior resident complex, according to Boyd.

However, a 2002 study by University of Minnesota researcher Edward Goetz reported that although the relocation helped many families move to other neighborhoods, overall it didnâ€™t help the families improve their financial situations.

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“The [relocation] policy has not adequately taken into consideration the value of the human connections that people have in the communities where public housing is located,” said local human rights attorney Peter Brown. He agrees with Gardner that public housing residents are “the forgotten people” in our society.

“They are the people that are moved about like so many jigsaw puzzles,” Brown added. “Their voices were not heard. The lives of the displaced tenants were not valued, were not seen, and the value of the existence of their community was invisible.”

“Every family [affected by the Hollman Decree] had an opportunity and was invited to move back,” Boyd argued. “But because of time, only 37 chose to move back, plus three additional persons moved into our senior development.”

Across Minnesota, 36,000 low-income people live in public housing in 210 communities; this includes 12,000 children. Most households in Minnesota public housing (around 59 percent) are White, with 30.5 percent Black, 8.8 percent Asian, 2.4 percent Latino, 1.8 percent Native American, and all others making up less than one percent.

The largest concentration of public housing units can be found in the seven-county Twin Cities area: Hennepin, Dakota, Ramsey, Carver, Washington, Anoka and Scott Counties. Due to HUD budget cuts “a statewide loss of nearly \$13 million from 2002 to 2007” the public housing crisis is real in Minnesota, says Minnesota Housing Partnership (MHP) Research and Outreach Coordinator Leigh Rosenberg.

“Most households in public housing are extremely low-income, with an average income of slightly over \$12,000 [annually],” she points out. “Sixty-five percent of people in public housing either are elderly, disabled or both. We are talking about people who are not likely to earn money in the workforce anyway. We really see this as a safety-net type of housing.”

According to an MHP public housing report released in May, public housing residents, one-third of whom are children, are frequently at risk for homelessness, and over 92 percent of housing authorities statewide have a waiting list.

The public housing crisis isn’t just situated in the state’s largest urban areas of Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth, Rosenberg pointed out. “This is not in any way just in urban areas, but it is across the state.”

Finally, the public housing crisis is a human rights issue. Housing is not a commodity, but a right, Gardner said. “It is a fundamental necessity to really living a productive life.”

Charles Hallman welcomes reader responses to challman@spokesman-recorder.com, or read his blog: www.wchallman.blogspot.com.

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