



POAH

PRESERVATION OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The Choice Neighborhood Initiative Grant's Potential *by Andrew Spofford, Policy Director, Preservation of Affordable Housing*

POAH's receipt of a HUD Choice Neighborhoods grant in support of its revitalization efforts at Grove Parc in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood is the subject of a recent article in *National Journal* by well-regarded public affairs correspondent Ronald Brownstein. The article describes the Woodlawn Choice initiative in the context of the Obama administration's urban strategy on the one hand, and the community's history of distress on the other. He concludes with a cautionary note: "Bright and airy, the sleek new buildings now welcoming their first families physically embody the promise of renewal. But years ago, so did the tattered apartments that now await the wrecking ball."

"Why," Brownstein asks, "should we expect the Choice initiative to succeed when past attempts at neighborhood renewal have not?"

There are several good reasons to believe HUD's new approach to revitalizing poor communities *will* work based on the experience of some past federal programs and simple logic.

POAH's plan for the renewal of the 12-acre Grove Parc site within Woodlawn takes previous lessons into account while introducing more contemporary practices about how to build successful, mixed-income urban communities. The most prominent lesson that was learned at this site and at many other large, distressed public and assisted housing sites across our nation is that the fates of large residential developments and their surrounding neighborhoods are closely linked. Neither can be dealt with in isolation and both must advance on parallel tracks.

In the case of Woodlawn and Grove Parc, the connection has historically been a negative one; since Grove Parc's construction in 1970, arson, disinvestment, crime in the surrounding neighborhood, and a general decline in population made renting units at Grove Parc extremely challenging. The resulting loss of operating revenue meant less funds were available for property maintenance, management and security – creating a negative feedback loop in which the neighborhood and the property followed each other through a spiraling, decades-long decline.

Today POAH and its partners in Woodlawn are working to reverse the direction of this continuous loop instead making mutually beneficial investments at Grove

Parc and in the surrounding community to break down long-standing barriers to success in this strategically located, well-connected neighborhood. Our approach recognizes that the challenges faced by Woodlawn and other urban neighborhoods – poverty, blight, foreclosure, crime and struggling schools – are complex and interwoven and that fixing them will require a comprehensive and simultaneous approach that addresses them in a coordinated manner.

The \$30.5 million Choice grant makes the redevelopment of the Grove Parc site viable but the grant alone is not nearly sufficient to address the needs of a community the size of Woodlawn, with its population of nearly 24,000 residents spread over two square miles. Rather, the Choice program emphasizes the need to leverage other resources and coordinate with ongoing community efforts and it provides essential "bridging" resources to support coordination and to make key, targeted investments beyond the target housing units.

The coordination of so many moving parts may be one of the projects biggest challenges but it is critical to its success. No one organization can transform the community by itself. In Woodlawn, a community with a long history of organizing and engagement, the Choice grant leverages and provides support for a range of community efforts including: a Woodlawn Children's Promise Community modeled on the Harlem Children's Zone; the community planning and coordination work of the LISC-supported Woodlawn New Communities Program; the Enhanced Anti Violence Initiative spearheaded by the Chicago Police; and other local initiatives.

In this vision of a revitalized Woodlawn, families will receive child care, financial counseling and health screening to help them move out of poverty. Young people will receive education and training to prepare them for jobs and violence prevention programs to help them reject unhealthy alternatives. The Woodlawn community will once again enjoy the convenience of nearby commercial establishments that will enhance the quality of life for resident. Of course, the new housing is the anchor for these community improvements, providing clean, decent and safe homes that are the nucleus for family security.

So to answer Brownstein's question – there are no guarantees in life but there is strong evidence that comprehensive approaches work better than patchwork ones. By promoting the concept of leveraging a smaller pool of dollars to yield a large pool of investments, HUD has good reason to believe that Choice will succeed both in Chicago and beyond.

