

## **HOUSING AUTHORITY OF THE COUNTY OF DEKALB COMMUNITY LEADER INPUT AND INSIGHTS**

In September-October 2014, Nonprofit Leadership Solutions conducted interviews with 9 community leaders to seek their input and insights on the Housing Authority of DeKalb County. An additional 6 leaders offered their comments via an online survey.

### **1. What is your overall perception of the Housing Authority's properties or voucher programs as a value or detriment to the community?**

- a. It is a great value to the community although a complex process to apply for and often disappointing to clients.
- b. I think the Housing Authority provides decent, safe and affordable housing to people who are elderly, disabled and/or living in poverty.
- c. Extremely valuable to the community.
- d. Very valuable.
- e. Programs of value though much abuse with bringing in significant others to live with them.
- f. Programs are needed in spite of right wing misperceptions of their extent.
- g. I question how much is on vouchers. There are an awful lot of units being subsidized. Housing Authority properties are kept well and are clean.
- h. On a scale of 1 to 10, it's 10. They do very well. I did Meals on Wheels at Sycamore and it's kept up to date and neat even though it's a 20-year old property.
- i. More of a value than a detriment. In terms of being a landlord, the perception on vouchers is negative – people are confused about the fact they are still in control of their property. Let landlords know that this program still allows them to run their property how they choose. The federal rules leave landlords open to a gap in filling units.
- j. Very pleased with the quality of buildings and landscaping. In 13 years, we've maybe had two people who have derisive. We rarely get any negative comments. If there were a groundswell, I think I'd know it. There is a noticeable absence of complaints in Sycamore. The Housing Authority has done a good job of blending their properties into the community.
- k. Great. In the Community Action program, we believe that the voucher program helps lift people out of poverty. We could increase our communication to the landlords so they know what we do.
- l. The perception is good. Tenants are good people, no problems overall. Occasionally, you get somebody cheating the system, but the authority really stays on top of it.
- m. The value is apparent – they are maxed out. They can't take any more people in certain classes. There are definitely problem housing complexes in the community – what the Housing Authority has going for it is that they are not associated with the problem properties.
- n. I'm a big supporter. It is a benefit to the community and there is always going to be a need in the community. They are delivering a good product efficiently. They've maintained the units well and they need to build on that.
- o. It's definitely a value – especially the voucher program. They've improved their responsiveness to families in crisis and are doing a good job of connecting with other organizations.
- p. My view of the facilities is positive. This Housing Authority is well-regarded.

**2. If you've had interaction with the Housing Authority staff, how would characterize that interaction and the quality/professionalism of the staff? Identify any problems that may have occurred.**

- a. Clients report that at times the staff are harsh and impatient. Our staff do not experience that when they advocate. They have found Housing Authority staff to be helpful and professional.
- b. The Housing Authority staff are kind, empathic and professional. They treat their residents and members of the community with dignity and respect.
- c. The staff is excellent, very professional in all respects. I am [REDACTED] which is staffed by [REDACTED]. DCHA provides vouchers for our tenants who are developmentally disabled, battered women, or family units in distress.
- d. Excellent staff and very professional.
- e. I have had numerous contacts. Very professional, caring, and friendly
- f. Staff is first rate.
- g. They do an excellent job managing those (Residential Development Corporation) properties. We don't have any problems.
- h. [REDACTED] is one of the best we've seen and we've had some good ones.
- i. They really do a good job. They screen well and make sure that the residents have need. They do monitor them closely – closer than most landlords do.
- j. They do a good job of screening and good supervising of the people who stay. They're real good at working with us on problems. The onsite and regional supervisors are very cooperative. We had one employee who got an attitude, but administration took care of it right away – I was very impressed.
- k. The management team is extremely strong and work as a team. They are a good decision-making team. The communication is so strong – it's almost too much. Community Action clients say they feel respected and issues are taken care of. They do a good job informing other social service agencies to help people access housing.
- l. The staff is very approachable.
- m. The staff is not very visible. The Housing Authority didn't come up as an issue at the DeKalb Leadership Academy.
- n. We've worked through them for venues to reach their tenants/clients for financial literacy program. They're very professional.
- o. They have a good leadership team. [REDACTED] are fantastic. They are very engaged in the community. [REDACTED] from the hi-rise is involved in the community. That makes a difference, it's a real plus.

**3. What do you think the need will be for subsidized housing in the greater DeKalb County area in 5 or 10 years?**

- a. Probably still significant. If there are not more jobs that create a living wage and more affordable housing, it will continue to be an issue in 5 or 10 years.
- b. Due to the increasing percentage of people living in poverty in DeKalb County, the need for subsidized housing will only increase.
- c. I think the need will increase but the mix of "clients" may change significantly. What started as a retirement center now serves other members of our community who are in distress.
- d. The need will increase.
- e. The more that is available, the more it will be used.
- f. Greater.
- g. It's too big an issue for the feds to totally cut back.
- h. Probably substantial. Once you extend subsidies, how do you retract them? People get used to it.
- i. At least at the same level as now. The Housing Authority is going to need to partner with social service agencies to help serve new people coming in – people with extra challenges (mental health issues, poor money management).
- j. The community's housing needs will be mixed – low, middle, upper income.
- k. It's hard for me to see that it would decline. They're in a tough spot. People relate subsidized housing to minorities coming to town and "ruining" our little town. I don't share that perception, but it is there by some. I think there's an unmet need. There is a reduced number of places for homeless people. You have to wonder if some people in the police blotter would have not committed crime if they had a place to live. If you get your housing taken care of – your desperation declines.
- l. The need is growing at a pretty quick clip. The need for free or reduced fee lunches in the school goes up 2% every year. 58% of students are on free or reduced fee lunch. It went from 54 to 58% this year. There were 320 new low income students this year.

**4. What do you think is the greatest strength of the Housing Authority of the County of DeKalb?**

- a. The great care that is taken to keep the actual housing safe, clean and attractive is impressive. Also, [REDACTED] is a strong and visionary leader.
- b. The greatest strength of the Housing Authority is their staff! They truly care about the community and the most vulnerable people who live in DeKalb County.
- c. Technical knowledge, patience and creativity to find solutions to problems others might see as intractable . A supportive DCHA board and willingness with work with other community agencies to solve community problems.
- d. Their staff is professional, they care about the community, and will work collaboratively with other agencies.
- e. The staff.
- f. Awareness of staff.

**5. What do you think are the greatest weaknesses of the Housing Authority?**

- a. The bureaucracy and complexity of the process to apply for assistance is a barrier as well as the amount of housing is insufficient to meet the need.
- b. Their greatest weakness is beyond their control which is the limited resources they receive from the federal government and the hoops they have to jump through to obtain and maintain those resources.
- c. Outdated buildings and aging infrastructure.
- d. Funding.
- e. The system in which it works and not being able to ferret out abusers.
- f. Inadequate number of vouchers.

**6. Federal funding for low income housing continues to decline. Do you have ideas for ways that the Housing Authority can generate new revenues, create partnerships, or otherwise obtain the resources to continue to be viable in the future?**

- a. Partnerships with community businesses and landlords in the community are going to be necessary to provide more resources. More economic development is needed to create jobs that pay a living wage which will help lower the need for low income housing.
- b. Work with local developers, landlords, politicians and political leaders to promote housing that is decent, safe and affordable as well as effectively managed and maintained.
- c. The DCRDC was an imaginative solution years ago to the need to acquire capital for the acquisition of housing to serve impoverished, sometimes mentally ill, sometimes battered men and women in desperate need. Today, partnerships with well-funded NGOs and Foundations could be sources of financial support. The subject deserves more thought.
- d. I wish I had an answer for them, but as a police agency we are facing the same challenges.
- e. Pushing for inclusionary housing programs with developers of new property, partnering with the city in CDC type of redevelopment programs
- f. Raising taxes wouldn't go over with anyone.
- g. They've done a good job at trying to diversify starting with Briarwood. I could see an enterprise where they add an extra layer of services for clients. The Housing Authority could maybe use a development staff person.
- h. Create partnerships with the trades, entrepreneurs, cities and 501(c)3's. It's going to take somebody who knows how to pull people together to make those things happen. Perhaps rehabbing homes in partnership with cities. There needs to be a little bit more staff to get done all that needs to be done. If you've got big plans, it's going to take somebody with time to wine and dine and network.
- i. People will give, but you need to show the need. Sometimes you have to put it an "in your face" terms. You need to put a face on the problem. There are a lot of perceptions that you have to work to counteract.
- j. They took a big step in staying viable by buying Briarwood and investing in mixed rate and market rate housing. There is more that could be done through the Residential Development Corporation. With the right presentation, you could convince them to do more. We've got resources. Both boards need an opportunity to sit down and expand our working relationship.
- k. Costs continue to rise. The need for affordable housing for families is especially acute. It's hard to find properties. More mindful planning has to come from the top down. We need creative solutions around developers and landlords. Housing was one of the things identified as need by the Advancing DeKalb Foundation.
- l. The area is pretty philanthropic, so maybe some family foundation would give. The government needs to figure out how to get its act together. There's several properties I'd like to see the Housing Authority manage.

**7. Add any additional positive or negative comments you have about the programs, services or facilities provided by the Housing Authority of the County of DeKalb.**

- a. I am very impressed with the Housing Authority and the facilities in DeKalb County. I previously lived and worked in DuPage County for a number of years and I think the low income housing here is much better.
- b. I think the Housing Authority is a leader and model on how Housing Authorities should work with other community agencies, especially around the issue of homelessness. They are dedicated and committed to reducing homelessness and expanding housing options even when it requires more work and responsibilities on an already taxed staff. I think the way they maintain their properties in the community is a testament to the respect and dignity they treat the most vulnerable members of our community. Their properties are not the stereotypical "subsidized housing" or "public housing" images. Rather they are clean, well maintained and reflect a sense of home and security. This "client centered" model of services is part of their mission and is effectively carried out by their staff.
- c. Overall, the DCHA does an excellent job with the limited resources that it has available to it.
- d. All positive.
- e. I appreciate the cooperation and assistance I have received from the HADC.
- f. Residential Development Corporation – where do we go from where we're at? We don't always get all the tenants we need. We can only supply housing, we can't take care of their other needs.
- g. There's always a concern that we're attracting some to the area that we'd rather not. They've worked on that perception. There is more need than we've had in the past. Unfortunately, some people get used to having the benefit.
- h. We occasionally get (police) calls to the Civic Apartments or the series of buildings on North Cross, but it's not out of proportion to the calls we get elsewhere. No news is good news. They do not constitute a problem. There are no hot spots in the calls we get to voucher program properties. // (Housing Authority staff) should continue to train employees on safety/crime prevention procedures. Just continue the vigilance they've shown.
- i. The relationship with the community is on an upward trend. We're very much going forward despite challenges. We have positive energy. The staff is looking for opportunity.
- j. We have a big hearted, diverse community. We have elite educated people and more conservative folks. But when you can show there's a group who needs help and this is how you can help them, that transcends the divisions.
- k. If people understood the Housing Authority, it would be better. People think they're HUD, but they're not. You're never going to have 100% community support and some landlords who won't participate.
- l. If we do referrals, we don't have good way to circle back, closing the loop. They should keep increasing their sharing of information with other social services. It would be good to work with others on job services – to bring people out of the voucher system. They should encourage their clients to take advantage of the services available. There is some apathy among clients about getting out of the system.
- m. If you're a tenant using Housing Authority services, perhaps there's some way you have to give back to the community.

**Community leaders who took part in a phone interview or online survey**

- John W. Castle, currently independent director of a mid-size regional bank; president of the DeKalb County Residential Development Corporation
- Mitch Hallgren, board member, DeKalb County Residential Development Corporation
- Carl Leoni, Crime Free Housing
- Dawn Littlefield, Kishwaukee United Way
- Gene Lowery, DeKalb Police Chief
- Donna Moulton, DeKalb County Community Action
- Eric Olson, Daily Chronicle
- Fred Rhynders, board member, DeKalb County Residential Development Corporation
- Frank Roberts, Castle Bank
- Brad Rubeck, DeKalb Area Rental Association
- Herb Rubin, housing activist and academic
- Don Thomas, Sycamore Police Department
- Mary Ellen Schaid, Executive Director of Safe Passage
- Ellingsworth Webb, Eden's Garden
- Lesly Wicks, Hope Haven
- Bob Wildenradt, board member, DeKalb County Residential Development Corporation