



Creating the Aspirational Community

Roundtable
September 2013

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2013, Citizens Housing & Planning Council (CHPC) convened eleven experts on homeless policy, supportive housing, and community development for a roundtable discussion around *Creating the Aspirational Community*. The goal was to engage in an open and meaningful conversation about how to more effectively help the homeless and those facing homelessness as New York City approaches new records in its shelter population.



The roundtable was held at Dorothy Day Apartments in Harlem in September 2013.

Over the past 30 years, the number of homeless individuals in New York City has increased almost five-fold from approximately 7,500 in 1982 to over 36,000 in 2011.¹ Families have experienced this increase even more acutely. In 1982 there were over 1,000 homeless families in shelter, by 2013 there were 11,000 families, an eleven-fold increase. For those with children, the average length of stay in shelter is 337 days. Even after leaving shelter, 56% of families wind up returning to the system compared with 22% a decade ago, indicating that the City shelter system largely fails to create the opportunities clients need to find and maintain stable housing.

Supportive housing groups have attempted to address this by providing social services to their residents alongside housing. Since the early 1990's they have created 40,000 units of housing for singles² and made a positive difference in the lives of thousands of vulnerable people. Many more housing units have been set aside for homeless families. Unfortunately, the families that enter the shelter system today largely come from the same neighborhoods as they did 30 years ago – namely in Central Brooklyn, the South Bronx, and Northern Manhattan. More troubling

¹ Source: Department of Homeless Services for all figures on homelessness.

² Source: Supportive Housing Network of New York.

is that new neighborhoods are being added to the list, like Williamsbridge in the Bronx and Jamaica in Queens.

It is in this context that CHPC convened the roundtable discussion to pose the question: *n How do we create aspirational communities?*

“Aspirational communities” = communities that can help lift people out of poverty and help them to prosper

Participants discussed the causes behind the increase in family homelessness, the challenges to breaking cycles of generational poverty, the policies that have worked or failed in alleviating poverty, and what changes should be put in place to improve outcomes.

What follows are the main ideas and policy proposals that emerged from the group discussion:

I. STRENGTHENING NEIGHBORHOODS

“We must have a geographic focus and clear priorities”

The theme that most forcefully emerged throughout the day’s discussion was the need for government to refocus its policies and programs on neighborhoods. Public policies currently emphasize helping individuals’ and families’ immediate needs, an approach that fails to improve the neighborhoods where they live. One roundtable guest described today’s approach to public policy as “*Here is a broken soul that happens to be in your community. Which is very different from helping the community per se.*”

The neighborhoods most affected by this approach - places like Hunts Point, Mott Haven, Fordham, Soundview, Bedford Stuyvesant, Brownsville, and East New York - have remained the primary feeders into the homeless shelter system for three decades. Though they consistently score poorly on nearly every indicator of neighborhood health (homelessness, crime, health, and graduation rates), our public policies fail to target neighborhoods as a whole and continue to address each problem in isolation. As a result, aspirations of a better life for children fade and new generations repeat the cycle of homelessness and poverty faced by earlier generations.



The City administration needs to implement place-based strategies that will shift the focus of its policy interventions to the neighborhood level. Limited resources aimed at improving the lives of low-income households can have a greater effect if they are targeted *in their neighborhoods*. As one participant observed, “*today DHS has become the only place to get social services 24/7; people go to DHS to get services that are not available in their communities.*” From housing, parks, and education, to social services, homelessness prevention, and job training, City programs should work together *within neighborhoods* and with the local public and private institutions that are connected to the residents in those communities. Each City agency should analyze the needs of target communities and set neighborhood-based goals.

It is crucial that City programs also recognize and support existing community assets. The successful settlement houses model for making needs assessments in neighborhoods is worth replicating. Whether it is the local library, an established community-based nonprofit, or a well-

used after-school program, local institutions can be powerful partners to advance the City's policy objectives. In too many of these troubled communities, residents lack the ability to find local resources that can help them overcome a momentary crisis. Consequently, the City should support the community resources that sustain and increase the social networks of households in poverty so that they can have the tools and resources they need to respond to problems before a relatively minor trigger event results in a much larger crisis. Building and strengthening these social networks requires knowing a community and supporting its anchor institutions.

Collective proposal:

City government should set goals in each neighborhood that recognize the diversity of New York City's communities. These goals should be in response to each neighborhood's specific needs and resources. Strategies to achieve these goals should include partnerships with local anchor institutions and should aim to support and expand their capacity.

2. MAKING EDUCATION CENTRAL TO EVERY POLICY

“We need to wrap children in educational opportunity”

Schools and organizations that support educational enrichment are uniquely positioned to serve as anchor institutions in their communities. There are not many places where hundreds of children, teenagers, teachers, and parents can come together within a neighborhood on a daily basis to share information and resources. It is insufficient, however, to simply call for an increase to school funding or to focus exclusively on improving the educational curriculum.

Support for educational success must start in early childhood and be a constant and on-going component of any place-based strategy. To increase educational opportunity, the City must reinforce neighborhood-based organizations and social service providers that support parents so that their children will be successful in school. There are opportunities to do this in housing - as a developer participating in the discussion observed, “we need to think about incorporating education, the arts, etc. into our projects.” These building-based services should be a resource for the broader community, as is the case at Dorothy Day Apartments, where the roundtable was held. At Dorothy Day, supportive housing is combined under one roof with an early childhood education center that is open to the neighborhood. It aims to break a cycle of what another participant described as a “lack of quality education in many neighborhoods that gets passed on from generation to generation and keeps people in poverty.”

All participants recognized that education is a key leveler that can create opportunities for escaping cyclical poverty, but that there is a need for a “cradle-to-college approach” incorporating educational opportunities into every aspect of children’s, and parents’, lives. For such an approach to be successful, however, government agencies must work together to improve educational opportunities neighborhood by neighborhood.

Collective proposal:

Devise a plan for every City department to incorporate educational opportunities for children into their area of focus. Require that they consider impacts on education as part of their decision-making process.

3. BREAKING DOWN GOVERNMENT SILOS

"There is no-one in government who goes into the office every day and asks: what can I do today to make Brownsville a better place to live?"

Many in the group were concerned City agencies are excessively “siloed” and therefore incapable of devising the type of comprehensive policy approaches to neighborhoods necessary to create aspirational opportunities. “*Commissioners are focused on their issues, not on communities,*” one person said. Multiple agencies carry out housing and planning responsibilities without any coordination. One City agency provides homelessness prevention services, another healthcare, another housing, and so on. Significant government resources are spent solving problems one person at a time rather than coordinating them at the neighborhood level.

This often results in misaligned policies and inefficiencies. An example from the discussion focused on funds intended to house the homeless benefitting bad landlords who collect large sums to operate their buildings as shelters. Low-income tenants paying affordable rents can lose their apartments to make way for shelter operators collecting far more than the local median rent.

Fluidity and coordination among agencies is fundamental to avoid one agency undermining another’s efforts. Siloed government agencies often consider their programs successful as long as they meet internal targets, even if they do not advance coherent public policy or improve people’s lives. One participant noted: *“numbers on housing production need to be counted differently; when we say x number of units were built, this gives us no information on who is benefitting.”* One example of this problem discussed was that, because HPD’s housing preservation programs such as the 8A loan program for repairs are given numerical targets, the policy focus for preservation has moved to large Mitchell Lama buildings and away from small rental buildings, which often have more repair issues and are a vital part of the housing stock. Another participant added: *“the Mayor’s Agency Reports need to drill down and provide information on race, community district etc. to show the disparities that exist at the neighborhood level.”* Metrics-driven analysis has a place in program evaluations, but only if those metrics are measuring meaningful outcomes.

With proper coordination, public dollars go further and policies can have more meaningful impact: *“HPD and DOHMH came together to fund supportive housing; there are examples of government being useful, overcoming silos,”* said one participant. Another suggested a system of inter-agency cooperation modeled on ULURP, *“The ULURP model can be useful because it requires input from various agencies. A model like ULURP could serve to incorporate considerations about impacts on schools.”* Another observed that government has effective coordination among agencies when it comes to emergency management procedures and that a similar system

should be put in place to achieve greater coordination between agencies at the neighborhood level.

Collective proposal:

Require City agencies to co-ordinate planning, funding, and programming in furtherance of the adopted City goals for each neighborhood. Explore how existing models of government co-operation (such as emergency management and ULURP) can be adapted to foster coordination in meeting these goals.

4. INTEGRATE PUBLIC HOUSING INTO NEIGHBORHOODS

“NYCHA is the key to any affordable housing solution, but it is too removed from the community”

If there is one agency that epitomizes siloed government that is NYCHA. NYCHA is an enormous resource of affordable housing in New York City but, as one person said, “*it has been treated as a stepchild of the City and its affordable housing policies for far too long.*” The public housing agency operates in a vacuum, isolated and disconnected from other housing agencies. Any conversation about housing and neighborhoods must have NYCHA at its center.



NYCHA has 378 housing developments located in nearly every neighborhood in the City, but they are isolated from their surroundings. Many NYCHA developments provide senior services, daycare, and after-school activities for residents that do not benefit the surrounding neighborhoods. These are places that can, and should, be integrated into the neighborhood and made assets for the whole community - where neighbors could meet one another and children could enjoy educational opportunities. One person stated, “*We must include NYCHA into every conversation and focus on the connection between housing and community, inside the buildings and outside them, at the neighborhood level.*” A developer at the table recognized the private sector’s own shortcomings, “*sometimes our buildings stand alone in the communities we build in. We need to focus on the relationship between housing and family life.*”

NYCHA offers an additional resource to the City in terms of measuring the success of any future place-based strategy to improve the lives of low-income households. For years, NYCHA

has collected information on its residents to determine eligibility for public housing, including indicators such as income, family composition, and work status. This data could be made available for longitudinal studies on the long-term impact of place-based strategies in neighborhoods around NYCHA developments and to measure the success of policies aimed at breaking cycles of generational poverty.

Collective proposal:

Integrate NYCHA and other City housing agencies by placing NYCHA, DHS, HPD, and HDC under a single housing umbrella. In setting City goals in each neighborhood, consider how NYCHA developments can be more fully integrated into the surrounding communities. Use NYCHA's data collection to track progress towards meeting the City's goals in each neighborhood.

NEXT STEPS

We will continue to meet with this group of experts throughout the year to add more detail to these ideas. As the City moves forward in 2014 under a new administration, we hope that the ideas generated from this roundtable can provide some initial policy direction to support the Mayor as he develops his agenda of creating a more equitable city. As this new administration undertakes the challenges of family homelessness and generational poverty, the staff and board of CHPC stand ready to assist the administration in any way that can be helpful.