Facing the Future: Strategic Solutions for Public Housing Agencies

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for

NEOTECH

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The Problem of Bureaucracy

Considering the vast scope of federally and state funded housing programs, oversight limits most review protocols to reviewing overall agency and program efficiency in lieu of monitoring the specific allocation of funds. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development oversees a daunting number of subsidy programs, each program with its own network of stakeholders consisting of federal, state, and local policymakers working with carrying degrees of effectiveness with private developers, financial companies, and other private interests. HUD has made attempts to combat what often amounts to a logjam of mission realization and policy enforcement by engaging with these stakeholders.

Smaller Housing Agencies Confront Their Own Set of Challenges

While some of the challenges faced by the largest housing agencies mirror those faced by HUD, smaller agencies face challenges very different from their larger counterparts. Smaller housing agencies are not limited to rural organizations serving the most sparsely populated areas of the country. Many smaller agencies are located within densely populated urban areas. Small agencies typically shoulder larger administrative costs than their larger counterparts. This out of proportion cost originates from the on average poorer performance of smaller agencies on HUD performance measurement systems. This substandard performance adds to the administrative costs of smaller programs by increasing the amount of oversight HUD devotes to these agencies.

Housing Choice Voucher Program

One of the largest HUD funded federally assisted housing programs is the Housing Choice Voucher Program, often referred to as Section 8. In this program, HUD's labor hours for contracting with a small housing agency and for conducting many oversight functions are roughly the same no matter the size of the agency or the number of families the agency services.

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Conventional public housing or programs where housing is provided through properties owned by the housing agency, faces its own set of challenges, with many units over 30 years old and in sore need of modernization.

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The Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) approved by Congress in 2012 is an attempt to meet the funding challenge presented by the deterioration of agency-owned public housing properties by shifting the funding method to emulate that of project-based Section 8 contracts. Such a shift in funding carries with it a need to consolidate the physical inspection criteria for the properties making the move from conventional to project-based contracts.

Uniform Physical Condition Standards - Voucher

HUD intends Uniform Physical Condition Standards – Voucher (UPCS-V) to enhance the consistency and objectivity of the Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspection process of Section 8 properties and to provide more detailed information about the condition of individual housing units. Instead of using a static checklist currently in use with the Housing Choice Voucher Program's HQS inspection protocol, UPCS-V will use a new classification system for describing the nature of deficiencies.

Housing Opportunity Through Modernization Act (HOTMA)

These inspection protocols are not the only efforts to improve assisted housing. The Housing Opportunity Through Modernization Act or HOTMA legislation focuses on the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) and the Project-Based Voucher (PBV) programs. A significant portion of HOTMA impacts inspection requirements for both HCV a tenant-based and PBV assistance.

A Study in Failure

While these measures address what may seem to be operational issues with a specialized area of concern for a specialized area of the population, recent events have demonstrated the degree of impact responses to administrative challenges are met. Unfortunately, neglected facilities often receive passing inspection grades, one of the most egregious of these led Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) to introduce the HUD Inspection Process and Enforcement Reform Act of 2016 protecting low-income residents from dangerous living

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New regulations and protocols for federally assisted housing programs press the need for innovation within housing agencies, but lasting solutions may require profound reexamination of the agency's vision.

While providing a potentially efficient business model, private sector models for asset management and financing present public housing agencies with more complicated challenges than their privately held counterparts. While public housing agencies must remain compliant with federally established operational and managerial regulations and guidance, instead of profit, public housing agencies have broader social roles than showing profit. Public housing agencies have a mission of social consciousness. This mission challenges agencies to pursue solutions that while emanating from the more technical areas of the organizations in the aggregate transcend the capabilities of a single department.

Technical and Adaptive Challenges

Such challenges resist being solved with current individualized expertise and require agencies to probe more mindfully into the challenges they face today, both internally and externally influenced. Challenges facing housing agencies may be broken down into what Ronald Heifetz in his work Leadership Without Easy Answers describes as "technical challenges" and "adaptive challenges." Together, meeting these challenges shapes the operative governance of every housing agency.

Housing agencies solve technical challenges through hiring staff skilled and trained in the fulfillment of regulatory and personnel objectives and equipping this staff with the tools they need to perform their duties, whether these tools be in the form of further or updated training or technology. Adaptive challenges such as fulfilling the social role of housing agencies while retaining fiscal and regulatory compliance, however, have few clear

answers and force the organization to see the larger picture and consider the synchronicity of each part of the challenge and the solution.

Collaborative Possibilities

Bringing all the housing stakeholders—housing managers, case workers, maintenance personnel, inspectors, tenants, etc.—to the table along with regular strategy session attendees such as management and administration provides the agency with divergent voices as thought partners to tackle both the technical and adaptive challenges as the agency develops its strategic vision and plans for future challenges. The task of modifying these paradigms and assumptions falls to organizational leadership, who themselves may be hobbled by approaching these complex and more subjective challenges from an outmoded perspective. Indeed, the idea of "thought partner" itself takes on a whole new aspect when viewed through the lens of collaborative problem solving. Without guidance, however, a real heterogenous mix of ideas would be difficult indeed.

The Collaborative Roles of Maintenance and Inspections

Nowhere is this potential for collaboration riper than with the inspection and maintenance departments of a public housing agency. Maintenance has the greatest potential to have the most immediate impact on the daily lives of occupants. Within housing agency, maintenance programs and inspections are inseparable. Performing regular, scheduled inspections ensures maintenance staff perform repairs and other maintenance tasks in a timely manner while identifying potential problems and correcting them before they become severe. Performance data are at their rawest in these initial reports and their immediate analyses. The overall strategy must go beyond the technical solution of performing inspections, reacting with correcting the prescribed deficiencies, and filing the results. The agency can build upon the output of the inspection system through engaging multi-level collaborative groups as thought partners, creating the real potential to provide innovative solutions to its challenges across the board.

Collaborative Solutions in Praxis

The challenge of housing more families with less funding grows even more daunting to housing agencies—emphasizing even more the importance of efficiency in property and staff management. Leaders in the assisted housing industry tend to be proactive, however,

and attack both the technical challenges of current objectives and the adaptive challenges of an industry in flux. Innovation within the inspection process need not come at a high cost or at the expense of existing staff and equipment. More practical, workable innovation would involve using readily available hardware and technology repurposed through software and support that maximizes their utility throughout the organization.

NeoTech's inspection system, NTInspect™, provides this innovative data reporting and data analysis along with a partnership that serves to encourage a healthy exchange of ideas and open lines of dialogue. NTInspect™ helps housing agencies meet the technical challenge of maintaining compliance and aids in the development of adaptive strategies for maintaining the agency's social identity and commitment.

INTRODUCTION

Public Housing Agencies of every size operate within a climate of competing challenges, ever-tightening funding constraints, and escalating compliance demands. This climate can create significant tension within an agency, ultimately hinder performance across the organization, and almost certainly complicate the achievement of even the most basic of performance objectives. Eventually, such limitations can permeate throughout the agency dramatically raising the potential for managerial and operational objective shortfalls while simultaneously creating difficulties in meeting the more subjective challenges public housing authorities face in their roles as socially conscious organizations, sometimes with disastrous results for both the agency and the community it serves. While developing strategies for meeting compliance directives involves staffing, training, and utilizing technology, developing strategies that meet these subjective challenges involves interpreting and adapting the data and analytics produced through a robust reporting system. Fostering collaborative relationships with underutilized resources—both internal and external—greatly enhances the effectiveness of the agency in meeting its compliance and fiscal goals while realizing its vision of its role in the community.

PART ONE

CHALLENGES FACING ASSISTED HOUSING AND STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS THROUGH LEGISLATIVE MEASURES

The Problem of Bureaucracy

Federal housing assistance programs present a regulatory and compliance behemoth—however necessary that bulk may be—limited in its effectiveness under even the best of circumstances. To operate public housing, administer vouchers, or both, nearly 3,800 public housing agencies (PHAs) receive funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). PHAs range dramatically in size, with some receiving funding for a handful of rental assistance units and others for thousands. The largest PHA in the country, the New York City Housing Authority, for example, receives HUD funding for nearly 274,000 units.[1] The sheer number of federally and state funded housing programs makes oversight a daunting task on the federal level with most review protocols in place limited to reviewing the efficiency of the overall program rather than the specific allocation of funds. Such limitations should not be surprising considering that HUD oversees an enormous number of subsidy programs, each with its network of stakeholders often dividing responsibilities between federal, state, and local policymakers and involving private developers, financial companies, and other private interests. This scope of the department and the depth of its reach into the housing industry inevitably leads to the creation of an impressive bureaucracy that often hobbles the effectiveness of the department. Larger housing agencies, many with staffs of dozens of employees, are susceptible to a similar drag on efficiency with a high potential to lose touch with the effectiveness of the program.

Nevertheless, HUD recognized the need for limiting its own bureaucracy to streamline, in its own words, "the number of unnecessary, time-consuming and redundant processes" and developed the plans for building a "Business Practices Exchange" as one of the pillars of its efforts.[2] This exchange would engage HUD with stakeholders in assisted housing throughout the industry: housing agencies, landlords, tenants, community organizations, program participants, and HUD employees. This movement towards

collaboration with assisted housing stakeholders continues to be a step in the right direction as we shall see in part two of this paper.

Smaller Housing Agencies Confront Their Own Set of Challenges

Larger housing agencies have not cornered the market on problems, however. Smaller housing agencies, defined by HUD as administering fewer than 250 rental units, bring their own set of challenges. Thinking of small agencies as primarily rural and serving only sparsely populated rural areas is a step in the wrong cognitive direction. In their article for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Sweeping Deregulation of Small Public Housing Agencies Would Do More Harm Than Good," Will Fischer and Barbara Sard state that 49 percent—almost half--of all units administered by small agencies are in metropolitan areas. As example, they cite the 68 small Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) that administer housing vouchers in the greater Boston metropolitan area. These agencies are in addition to the area's 25 larger agencies and two state-administered housing voucher programs.[3]

Housing Choice Voucher Program

Not surprisingly, this fragmentation of housing administration brings greater financial burden to administering federal rental assistance programs and inevitably damages their effectiveness across the board. One of the largest HUD funded federally assisted housing programs is the Housing Choice Voucher Program, often referred to as Section 8. In this program, HUD's labor hours for contracting with a small housing agency and for conducting many oversight functions are roughly the same

HOUSING QUALITY STANDARDS (HQS)

Units within the tenant-based rental assistance Housing Choice Voucher program are required to pass Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspections, one of the simpler inspection protocols in terms of scoring in the federally assisted housing industry. Much as with the other inspection protocols, HQS inspections define inspectable areas within a unit and require not only that the required facilities exist within a rental unit, but that each component within the inspectable area is in working condition and is safe and sanitary. If a single required component fails, the landlord has a prescribed time period in which to repair the deficiency (often 30 days for non-life threatening deficiencies; 24 hours for life-threatening failed items). If the landlord fails to repair the deficiency within the specified time, then the agency is required to abate the Housing Assistance Payment made to the landlord on behalf of the tenant.

no matter the size of the agency or the number of families the agency services. Fischer and Sard find that "federal oversight costs are much higher per family for small agencies." They cite a 2008 HUD report that estimated "between half and two-thirds of the effort HUD put into basic compliance monitoring went toward agencies administering only 10 percent of units."[4]

These higher costs extend from the federal level and adversely impact the small agencies' administrative costs. On the average, small agencies shoulder larger administrative costs than their larger counterparts. The reasoning is very similar to that of the higher compliance monitoring and oversight costs on the federal level. Regardless of the number of families serviced by the agency, the cost for many of the administrative tasks remain the same no matter the number of families serviced by the agency. Fischer and Sard reference a HUD study that found per-voucher administrative costs to be 24 percent higher at agencies with fewer than 500 vouchers than at the largest agencies. Currently the funding formula used by HUD to determining administrative fees provides more funding per voucher to smaller agencies.[5] This higher per voucher cost is passed on to the federal government thereby further increasing the cost of funding the smaller agencies.

The problems facing smaller agencies do not end simply with larger costs. Fischer and Sard note that agencies with fewer than 250 authorized vouchers perform much more poorly than larger agencies on the Section 8 Management Assessment Program (SEMAP), HUD's voucher performance measurement system, adding that such agencies are "about four times more likely to be

designated as 'troubled' or 'near troubled' under SEMAP and less likely to be designated as high performers."[6] In addition, housing agencies without sufficient scale to devote staff time to plan and implement new initiatives are less likely to take advantage of options that provide additional types of housing opportunities, such as supportive housing for people with disabilities. Similarly, smaller PHAs are less able to spare staff time to develop partnerships with community agencies that could improve families' finances or help homeless individuals navigate the housing application process and find an appropriate unit if they receive a voucher. Small agencies invest less in technology, so they are less able to track various components of program operations to increase efficiency and improve outcomes, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) study found.[7] In the Housing Choice Voucher program, consistent communication with tenants and landlords exacerbate the problem with smaller and larger agencies alike. Many HCV programs within housing authorities are moving away from paper files and communication altogether, and the efficiency of the transition has been lackluster.

Conventional Public Housing

Conventional public housing or programs where housing is provided through properties owned by the housing agency, faces its own set of challenges. Many of the units administered by public housing agencies are over 30 years old and in sore need of modernization. Of the 15 percent of public housing units considered in substandard condition, approximately half of these qualify as "severely distressed." Such distressed properties have either at least one non-functional appliance or significant damage that negatively impacts the residents' quality of life.[8]

To monitor the conditions of properties set up under the conventional public housing system, HUD requires agencies to conduct annual Uniform Physical Condition Standards (UPCS) inspections. UPCS Inspections are the practical portion of the Physical Assessment Subsystem or PASS required of all Public Housing Authorities to remain in compliance with HUD. PASS is part of a larger evaluation of PHAs by HUD called the Public Housing Assessment System or PHAS. In brief, PHAS consists of

- PASS (Physical Assessment Subsystem) – 40 points
- FASS (Financial Assessment Subsystem) – 25 points
- MASS (Management Assessment Subsystem) – 25 points
- CFP (Capital Fund Program) – 10 points
- TOTAL: 100 points [9]

Scores are generated for each development, or Asset Management Project (AMP). AMP scores are weighted by how many units are in the AMP and then combined into the agency-wide score. The total score is used to determine the PHA's designation under PHAS. On the bottom end, total scores below 60 result in a troubled designation; conversely, scores of 90 points or above result in a high performer designation. Scores below 90 but above 60 are designated as a standard performer. A score below 60 in any individual component score identifies the PHA as a substandard performer in that area.[10]

Not to minimize the impact of the other scoring, at 40 points the PASS score sits atop the list of priorities for many PHAs in achieving and maintaining a high performer designation. Still, the REAC Inspection serves as the quality assurance portion of the PASS and by no means represents a curative tool in providing sanitary, safe and decent housing to PHA tenants.

Rental Assistance Demonstration

In further efforts to improve its aging infrastructure, HUD has taken steps beyond monitoring existing programs. Faced with over one million public housing units owned by public housing authorities, HUD and the agencies it oversees struggle with a backlog of public housing capital needs estimated to be close to $26 billion. According to a 2010 study, each year will bring an additional $3.4 billion in unmet capital needs. In 2012, Congress authorized the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) as an innovation in meeting this substantial funding challenge. RAD allows agencies to convert agency-owned public housing

properties to project-based Section 8 contracts. HUD expects this move to provide a more sustainable funding stream while making it easier for PHAs to leverage additional funding sources.[11]

So far, RAD is a voluntary program for agencies where they may decide whether to participate. While the program application process was open, agencies could apply to convert individual projects, multiple projects, or their entire asset portfolio. After approval of the application by HUD, the process of evaluating capital needs and securing financing to address those capital needs begins. After the evaluation process, HUD converts the agency's funding from conventional public housing into a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) contract much as with other Property Based Voucher programs. These HAP contracts are long term and automatically renew with a Use Agreement recorded on the land. Through this Use Agreement, the property both will continue to serve low-income residents and will permit the property to serve as security for debt needed for rehabilitation.

From 2012 through the fall of 2015, 14 percent of all PHAs and 16 percent of all public housing developments made application to RAD, and HUD has already made awards up to the cap that Congress set of 185,000 units that may be converted with thousands more units on a waiting list. To date, PHAs rely exclusively on existing resources and external funding for RAD transition. One of the goals of RAD is to provide funding for the rehabilitation of deteriorated or outdated properties. A full majority of RAD projects—63 percent—required some degree of rehabilitation, much of which are well underway. While 18 percent of RAD conversions have no need for immediate rehabilitation or

modernization, 19 percent had capital needs so severe that the units required demolishing and rebuilding altogether.[12]

Uniform Physical Conditions Standards - Voucher

Along with this movement to a private property management model, REAC has introduced a new inspection protocol much like the current Uniform Physical Conditions Standards protocol used for public housing properties. UPCS-V (the "V" signifies "Voucher") will aid HUD in its oversight of the Housing Choice Voucher program. HUD intends UPCS-V to enhance the consistency and objectivity of the inspection process and provide more information about the condition of individual housing units. UPCS-V is an update of the aging housing quality standards inspection protocol that Congress hopes will reflect current advances in home inspections and changes to standards of health and safety threats in modern properties. UPCS-V, REAC hopes, will help streamline the inspection process for both housing agencies and inspectors, while providing owners and tenants more easily accessed and detailed information about their properties and homes.[13]

Instead of using a static checklist currently in use with the Housing Choice Voucher Program's Housing Quality Standards inspection protocol, UPCS-V will use a new classification system for describing the nature of deficiencies. Much like the current UPCS protocol, deficiencies would be classified on an escalating scale, from minor to significant, and critical deficiencies may be further classified as life threatening or emergency. UPCS-V will utilize a new data transmission tool which would use the data to generate the Unit Condition Index that will provide valuable information to tenants, homeowners and PHAs about the condition of each unit. All inspection data would be converted to a standardized file format before submitted to a central HUD database.

HUD plans for the new inspection standard to integrate the new technology into a prototype system within which inspectors can conduct inspections on a handheld device capturing deficiencies along with supporting photographs in real time. For integration into existing systems, HUD would provide a data exchange framework for inspection data in Excel format. As of this publication, the UPCS-V protocol is in version 2.0 and undergoing demonstration by a number of housing authorities across the country as HUD gathers feedback for potential improvements of the system.[14]

Housing Opportunity Through Modernization Act (HOTMA)

On January 18, 2017, HUD published a notice in the Federal Register implementing many provisions of the Housing Opportunity Through Modernization Act or HOTMA legislation focusing on the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program and the Project-Based Voucher (PBV) programs. A significant portion of HOTMA impacts inspection requirements for both HCV a tenant-based and PBV assistance. The legislation requires the performance of physical inspections prior to the public housing agency making housing assistance payments on a unit; however, if such an inspection reveals deficiencies that are not life-threatening, then the PHA may approve tenancy under the new regulations in HOTMA. The owner has 30 days to make the corrections or the PHA may withhold payment. Further, the owner must correct life-threatening deficiencies found during the initial HQS inspection before any housing assistance payment is made by the PHA.[15]

Several HOTMA provisions pertain to the PBV program. Before HOTMA, up to 20 percent of an agency's Housing Choice Voucher funding could be used towards project-based vouchers. Under the new regulations, the limit is changed from 20 percent of the funding to 20 percent of the agency's authorized number of vouchers. Further, PHAs may convert an additional 10 percent of its authorized number of vouchers above the new 20 percent limit if the project-based vouchers are tied to units that serve households who are homeless or include a veteran, provide supportive housing for persons who have a disability or who are elderly, or are in a census tract with a poverty rate of 20 percent or less. Project-based vouchers attached to units previously subject to rent restrictions or that received another type of long-term HUD housing subsidy do not count toward the 20 percent limit.[16] Examples of such exceptions include public housing, Section 8 project-based rental assistance, Section 202 elderly housing, Section 811 housing for persons with disabilities, Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD), and various other types of HUD housing subsidies.

HOTMA changes the cap on the number of units assisted with Project-Based Vouchers from no more than 25 percent to the greater of either 25 units or 25 percent of the total units in a project. This cap comes with its own set of exceptions, however. These exceptions include units occupied by persons who are elderly or disabled or persons receiving a qualifying supportive service. HOTMA goes further in several other areas. It

removes the separate provision for people with disabilities. The statute also eliminates the requirement that someone in the household receives supportive services.[17] Instead, HOTMA requires that while supportive services be made available to all assisted households, a household is under no obligation to accept services. Households eligible for supportive services could include someone with a disability. Owners are not required to provide supportive services on-site, but such services must be reasonably available to the household. Participation in supportive services is no longer a mandatory condition of living in an excepted unit.

Project-Based Voucher HAP contract terms increase from 15 to 20 years under the new statute. The contract may be extended for an additional 20 years up to a maximum of 40 total years. After the expiration of the HAP contract or after its termination, a participating household must be given the opportunity to receive a tenant-based voucher in place of the voucher previously associated with the unit. Further safeguards for the household include the option to remain in their unit with the new voucher without fear of the owner terminating their tenancy.[18]

A Study in Failure

While these regulations address what may seem to be operational issues with a specialized area of concern for a specialized area of the population, recent events have demonstrated the degree of impact responses to administrative challenges are met. On September 22, 2016, the Senate Banking Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation, and Community Development held a hearing examining charges of negligence, health concerns, and frauduleNTInspections by Global Ministries Foundation (GMF) along with similar reports aimed at HUD. In July of 2015 Eureka Gardens, a GMF apartment complex in Florida, received a HUD inspection score of 91 percent.[19] This inspection score was contrary to actual physical conditions at the property. Residents reported that health issues and unsafe living conditions plagued the property. In her testimony at the 2016 hearing, Eureka Gardens Tenants' Association representative Tracey Grant described common conditions of mold, gas leaks, and lead poisoning. Perhaps even more damning was her report that HUD had been made aware of the conditions multiple times since 2013, but inspections by HUD representatives had never given the property a failing inspection score.[20]

On September 27, the week after the hearing, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) introduced the HUD Inspection Process and Enforcement Reform Act of 2016. The bill protects low-income residents from dangerous living conditions and takes measures to hold HUD accountable for prosecuting negligent property owners. In the bill, property owners would be required to comply with maintenance deadlines or face abatement of funding and eventual exclusion from HUD support altogether. The bill calls for independent audits of HUD inspections, which Rubio believes are necessary for holding HUD accountable, negative findings would result in the firing of sub-standard or negligent property managers, landlords, and inspectors.

Neglected facilities often receive passing inspection grades, which condemns residents to live in unhealthy conditions. Rubio exclaims "For too long, the slumlords at Global Ministries Foundation were able to get away with their despicable scheme in part because of HUD's lax oversight." Global Ministries Foundation owns several apartment complexes throughout the country and has been the subject of a federal investigation. The proposed bill would also move towards streamlining the process within HUD freeing the federal agency to relocate residents more efficiently and subsequently protect them from potentially dangerous living conditions.[21]

The old journalism cliché holds true here— "if it bleeds it leads" —in other words, the more spectacular the fall of a housing agency or a landlord, then the more attention the industry as a whole receives. This attention does have a potentially useful rule in improving the industry because fraud, corruption, and incompetence are like mold, they all thrive in the dark. A little sunshine goes a long way in limiting their spread. By and large, high performing agencies fulfill the regulatory and compliance objectives with at least an above average degree of competence. These agencies have mastered these portions of the process; however, a select few agencies have visions that exceed basic competence. These agencies become the leaders in their industry and have the opportunity to take the position of thought leaders guiding their peers through not only the labyrinth of regulation but also along the even more circuitous path to excellence.

PART TWO

TECHNICAL AND ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES AND A COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC SOLUTION

Certainly, the new regulations and protocols coming down the pike for federally assisted housing programs press the need for innovation within organizational policy and administration, but lasting solutions may require agencies to profoundly reexamine their vision. In today's political and socio-economic reality, survival for housing agencies of any size is a challenge, but for agencies that strive beyond mere survival—those housing agencies that strive towards nothing short of top tier performance must adopt a more revolutionary—maybe even more disruptive—mindset, one transcending mere survival and basic compliance, when developing strategies to meet today's challenges.

Divergence

The move towards more private sector models for asset management, for example, present public housing agencies with more complicated challenges than their privately held counterparts. Practically by definition, privately held property management organizations focus on achieving positive financial outcomes; simply put, their goal is to make money. Compliance and managerial objectives are means to an end, sometimes with the Machiavellian undertones intact—an organization like GMF a case in point. The top grossing private property management organizations have achieved an efficient system of effectively meeting compliance, managerial, and financial objectives. Creativity and innovation work towards maintaining this effective system, keeping the organization nimble enough to remain competitive within the industry.

Public housing agencies face this same set of base objectives: remaining compliant within federally established operational and managerial regulations and guidance. However, privately held housing providers and public housing agencies diverge in their overall roles within the industry. Instead of profit, public housing agencies have a more complicated economic and social mission. The role public housing agencies serve in their communities transcends the role of mere landlord, at least according to the stated missions of most housing agencies and the overall governing mission of HUD itself. The social aspects of public

housing—especially considering the reduction of funding available for special projects—present a set of challenges that expand beyond the scope of technical strategies or solutions.

The mission statements of many public housing agencies exemplify this socially focused directive. As part of its mission, the Chelsea Housing Authority in Chelsea, Massachusetts, states its commitment "to deconcentrating poverty within its federal conventional public housing developments and attempting and support wider access to affordable housing opportunities throughout the entire community."[22] Housing Opportunities of Southwest Washington indicates its awareness of its place in the community in its mission statement: "We promote and provide stable, affordable housing, and supportive services in an environment that nurtures individuals and families while encouraging personal responsibility."[23] HUD heralds as its mission "to create strong, sustainable, inclusive communities and quality affordable homes for all."[24] These broad statements of socially consciousness challenge the agencies to pursue solutions that while emanating from the more technical areas of the organizations in the aggregate transcend the capabilities of a single department.

Technical and Adaptive Challenges

Such challenges resist being solved with current individualized expertise and require agencies to probe more mindfully into the challenges they face today, both internally and externally influenced. This breed of challenges could be better addressed with the engagement of creative and "out of the box" thinking. The current demands in government assisted housing at every level suggest that agencies learn to see the environment of governmentally assisted housing as it is—structurally complicated, financially constrained, over- or under-regulated—depending on one's perspective—and, at the risk of using a pregnant term in the world of federal housing parlance, troubled. This environment tasks agencies to view the industry and its accompanying issues in a new way. Housing agencies at every level must think about their policies, practices, and processes differently to face the apparent morass of current and future challenges.

In perhaps more heady terms, the challenges facing housing agencies may be broken down into what Ronald Heifetz in his work *Leadership Without Easy Answers* describes as "technical challenges" and "adaptive challenges." Together, these basic forms of challenges

and how they are met shape the operative governance of every housing agency. Technical challenges and the strategies organizations use to meet them are by far more familiar than the more esoteric adaptive challenges and their often—at least superficially—esoteric strategic solutions. For Heifetz, a technical challenge is a situation where one can effectively apply current knowledge, expertise, and resources to deal with the problem. Such a challenge is met within the organization's operational structure or through the knowledge of outside experts.[25]

With the digitization of tenant files and other record keeping tasks, data and their analyses have become readily available. The initial reaction to such near real-time information tends to be reacting as quickly as possible after it is received; however, such an immediately reactionary response might not be best for the long-term health of the agency. While an efficient data delivery system provides the agency management and administration with solutions to the technical challenges of compliance and record keeping, making decisions that affect the evolution of the agency's vision require more deliberate thought. In their work, *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*, Robert J. Garmston and Bruce M. Wellman caution against "being seduced by the comfort of action."[26] For Garmston and Wellman, technical challenges represent problems that are easily identified and may be solved either relatively quickly and easily through managerial enforcement of new or existing policy. The problem with solutions to technical challenges, however, is that they rarely address the root of the problem. "Adaptive change," Garmston and Wellman write, "requires a systems view, asks for changes in values, is difficult to identify, easy to deny, requires altering numerous arenas within the organization, needs people with the problem to resolve it, and requires experimental thinking."[27] They a draw on an analogy from the medical field to make drive home this point. In treating high blood pressure, a technical solution would be to prescribe blood pressure medication, while an adaptive solution would be educating the patient to adopt a healthier lifestyle.[28] This distinction need minimize neither the importance nor the complexity of technical solutions. Administering budgets and allocating the resources necessary for operating housing agencies—both often involving millions of dollars in funding—certainly require vast degrees of technical expertise; Annual Contribution Contracts, operating budgets, and the like require equal amounts of linear reasoning and high level technical skill sets.

Housing agencies, therefore, solve technical challenges through hiring staff skilled and trained in the fulfillment of regulatory and personnel objectives and equipping this staff with the tools they need to perform their duties, whether these tools be in the form of further or updated training or technology. This description is of course a gross oversimplification that can be applied to almost any agency or organization; however, the simplification ends with its implementation. Organizations as subject to direct governmental oversight and regulation as public housing authorities face technical challenges that exceed typical private enterprise. In the case of federally assisted housing, HUD provides the lion's share of the agency's operating governance maintaining varying degrees of oversight and regulation of virtually all management and execution structures within the agency from what is expected from employees to how the organization defines priorities and manage risks. Part of the technical challenge in this instance is developing a system-wide understanding of HUD regulations, guidance, and implementation—therein lying the reasoning behind hiring and/or training qualified personnel at every level. Adaptive challenges such as fulfilling the social role of housing agencies while retaining fiscal and regulatory compliance, however, have few clear answers and force the organization to see the larger picture and consider the synchronicity of each part of the challenge and the solution.

Strategic Thought Partnerships

Bringing all the housing stakeholders—housing managers, case workers, maintenance personnel, inspectors, tenants, etc.—to the table along with regular strategy session attendees such as management and administration provides the agency with divergent voices as thought partners to tackle both the technical and adaptive challenges as the agency develops its strategic vision and plans for future challenges. Rania Anderson in her 2012 post on Forbes.com, "A Fascinating New Concept: How 'Thought Partners' Add Value to Your Business," defines a thought partner as a person who:

1. Challenges your thinking.
2. Causes you to modify or change your paradigms, assumptions or actions.
3. Has information or a way of thinking that provokes you to innovate or otherwise leads to value creation in your business. [29]

These stakeholders in the agency represent the full gamut of policy implementation, and perhaps their perspectives and insight offer potential to look at challenges in a new way,

perhaps inspiring management and policymakers, as Anderson says, to modify paradigms and assumptions, providing adaptive solutions to the adaptive challenges facing agencies.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

"Adaptive change is distressing for the people going through it," Heifetz says in *The Work of Leadership*. He sees ambivalence in many employees when confronted with the efforts and sacrifices required of them, looking to upper management to ease transitions into new protocols and policies. "Rather than fulfilling the expectation that they will provide answers, leaders have to ask tough questions," Heifetz continues. "Rather than protecting people from outside threats, leaders should allow them to feel the pinch of reality in order to stimulate them to adapt," Heifetz writes. Going even further, he advises leaders to "instead of maintaining norms, leaders have to challenge 'they way we do business' and help others distinguish immutable values from historical practices that must go." (Heifetz 47)

The task of modifying these paradigms and assumptions falls to organizational leadership, who themselves may be hobbled by approaching these complex and more subjective challenges from an outmoded perspective. Delving even deeper into this idea of inclusive collaboration, management consultant Margaret Wheatley identifies current modes of leadership as operating within a Newtonian mechanistic model. In her review of Wheatley's book, author Sue L.T. McGregor paraphrases Wheatley's substantial point that under the "old" science of leadership, "Work and workers are seen as an engineering problem. Work is divided into distinct tasks for which little training is needed. The goal is efficiency." [30] This idea is reminiscent of previous strategies for meeting technical challenges—departmentalized training and job assignments, all of which are surely necessary for a well-run, compliance-driven public housing agency. However, meeting the adaptive challenges of creating "strong, sustainable, inclusive communities," "encouraging personal responsibility" and other public housing agency socially conscious mission statements require a strategy beyond doling out assignments based on technical expertise. For Wheatley, "organizing a workplace using the old science leaves no room for our need to be trusted and to trust, for meaningful work, for a desire to contribute and make a difference and to take part in any change that affects us." [31] This level of trust may seem a bit touchy feely in a cogent discussion of problem solving within public housing, but a 2010 study of the effectiveness of collaboration adds more than a little credence to the importance of trust in group decision making.

Collaborative Possibilities

In their article, "Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups," published in the October 2010 issue of *Science*, Anita Williams Woolley and others show that the maximum intelligence of a collaborative group exceeds that of its individual members or that of its average. The study measured the performance of each group in word completion, estimation problems, spatial problems, and other group tasks and measures. Before working with their groups, individual participants completed intelligence, personality and social sensitivity tests. Woolley and her colleagues evaluated the communicative behavior of the groups in after the completion of the group activity taking measures of group satisfaction, motivation to perform well, social cohesiveness, and psychological safety. Instead of the contribution of individual intelligence or the average of all the members of the group, performance in problem solving was more correlated with three factors: "the average social sensitivity of group members, the equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking, and the proportion of females in the group." [32] The degree to which participants felt comfortable within their group, the coordination of equal participation, and shared motivation to perform well in the group tasks played a larger factor in overall performance. Within the study, the female participants demonstrated more awareness of the moods and sympathies of the other members of the group, a trait that greatly influenced the overall group task performance.

It takes little extrapolation to extend this collective intelligence to a capacity for collective problem solving ability. Indeed, the idea of "thought partner" itself takes on a whole new aspect when viewed through the lens of collaborative problem solving. This approach not only legitimizes the potential for effective collaboration across the agency, but should encourage such multi-level involvement in developing strategies for meeting operational challenges even those challenges that on the surface may transcend the typical job descriptions of individual collaborative team members. When developing strategies for meeting these challenges the inclusion of stakeholders from every level of the organization heightens the opportunity for real innovation. Indeed, Wheatley encourages organizations to look within, to see individual group members as critical resources. Organizations, she says "need to learn how to engage the creativity that exists everywhere in our organizations." [33]

In their Harvard Business Review article, "Are You a Collaborative Leader?" Herminia Ibarra and Morten T. Hansen, goes even further. They write that "Left to their own devices, people will choose to collaborate with others they know well or who have similar backgrounds. Static groups breed insularity, which can be deadly for innovation." In other words, without guidance a real heterogenous mix of ideas would be difficult indeed. Tenants will consult with tenants, administrative personnel with administrative personnel, landlords with landlords, and so on. Hardly anywhere is there a shortage of landlord or tenant associations. These are certainly very effective for getting each group's voices heard, but innovative solutions and strategies require across the board collaboration. [34]

The Collaborative Roles of Maintenance and Inspections

Nowhere is this potential for collaboration riper than with the inspection and maintenance departments of a public housing agency. The traditional thinking surrounding a larger agency's inspection department centers around its role as a compliance-oriented tool. Indeed, that role is fundamental to its function; however, HUD acknowledges a more intimate role for inspections and maintenance within the structure of a housing agency. In *The Insider's Guide to Managing Public Housing*, the author emphasizes the significance of this role in no uncertain terms. "The quality with which [maintenance] is executed is commonly perceived as synonymous with the overall quality of management. Of all management operations, this one is likely to have the most immediate impact on the daily lives of occupants." [35] For assets directly administered by public housing agencies, maintenance programs and inspections are inseparable. Along with preventative maintenance, performing regular, scheduled inspections ensures maintenance staff perform repairs and other maintenance tasks in a timely manner while identifying potential problems and correcting them before they become severe. The information gathered from such a systematic inspection protocol can provide agencies with the data necessary for staff scheduling and deployment, equipment, inventory, and costs clearly broken down property by property. Performance data are at their rawest in these initial reports and their immediate analyses.

Taking for granted efficiency as a value-based property, the inspection system specifically has the potential to enhance the value of an agency. Inarguably, advanced data

analytics further increases the value of this informational substructure through their application to the agency's compliance, organizational, and even its visionary strategic objectives. Nevertheless, the overall strategy must go beyond the technical solution of performing inspections, reacting with correcting the prescribed deficiencies, and filing the results. Through a logic akin to the development of technical and adaptive solutions, the continued success of an inspection system—comprised of its data collection, analysis and application—begins with maintaining the quality of the data collection through using the most advanced tools available and training/employing quality inspection staff thus strengthening compliance with regulations both federal and local—the tangible and discrete indicators of compliance and administrative objectives. Incorporating the system actors into the strategic planning collective can preserve the integrity of the data and analyses in a way that static reports—no matter their quality and precision—can seldom reproduce.

Again, the raw data itself is only as useful as its application outside of the data analytics of the software and other technology. The performance indicators revealed by the inspection process provide short term data and analytics; without interpretation and application through strategic collaboration, they are limited to only short term solutions. Making full use of the inspection system therefore involves more than this technical application to meeting compliance objectives. The inspection system has at its core an organic interdepartmental relationship within the agency, and through this relationship, intuitive inspection data collection tools and methodologies serve the larger organization as the building blocks around which a housing agency may build the superstructure of its community vision. The agency can build upon the output of the inspection system through engaging multi-level collaborative groups as thought partners, creating the real potential to provide innovative solutions to its challenges across the board. The organization providing the inspection system to the housing agency would bring indispensable insight to such a collaboration.

Collaborative Solutions in Praxis

Considering the high potential for reduced funding for federally assisted housing, several of even the newer programs face uncertain times. The relatively new Rental Assistance Demonstration program, or RAD, which has seen and continues to see growing popularity among public housing agencies and financial stability, could lose some of its luster with reduced funding incentives for adopting private asset management models in administering properties formerly owned and controlled by public housing agencies. While RAD and similar programs will continue to be implemented across the country, the challenge of housing more families with less funding grows even more daunting to housing agencies—emphasizing even more the importance of efficiency in property and staff management. Operationally, nowhere in the organization is relevant data more available than within the results and analytics of the agency's inspection system. Inspection data documents and tracks physical conditions of properties, effectiveness of maintenance, procurement, and construction personnel, among other tangible discrete performance indicators. As fundamental to the agency as this utility of the inspection system may be, and it certainly can be the make or break indicator of the health of a housing agency, its potential utility does not end with monitoring the application of fiscal and administrative policies.

Admittedly no easy task, maintaining the status quo and meeting current guidelines and objectives remain certainly manageable within a competently run agency reacting to regulations and documented expectations as they are handed down from HUD and other governing bodies. The real leaders in the assisted housing industry tend to be proactive, however, and attack both the technical challenges of current objectives and the adaptive challenges of an industry in flux. The fundamental mission of a housing agency, whether on the local, state, or federal level boils down to meeting the objectives set by HUD (Financial, Property, Fair Housing, Tenancy, etc.) Often innovation is low on the list of these objectives, in particular within the agency's currently adopted inspection process; however, if the innovative idea or methodology can contribute in real time to the completion of the compliance mission, then it can transcend the simple functions of a mere tool and can become fundamental to the efficient operation and management of the agency. Such innovation within the inspection process need not come in the form of ground breaking new hardware. Considering the budget constraints of public housing agencies, purchasing specialized, proprietary equipment is potentially cost prohibitive for some agencies and an at

the least an unwieldy fit into current and future budgets. More practical, workable innovation would involve using readily available hardware and technology purposed through software and support that maximizes their utility throughout the organization.

With a user interface straightforward enough to be of immediate use to entry level users, NeoTech's inspection system NTInspect™ really flexes its muscles with the depth of data analysis accessible within the app itself. While portal access offers a myriad of formats for displaying and organizing reports, the data are available for immediate access in the field and on the fly. This depth of functionality does not encumber the user with an interface that muddies its true purpose as tool to evaluate properties per the most up to date library of regulations—all on the fly in the field. Together with the web portal and support staff, the NTInspect™ program is a self-contained inspection system.

In developing NTInspect™, NeoTech has drawn on its nearly two decades of software design, development, maintenance and support, guided by an experienced team of executive leadership, to create a field-tested solution that offers the Agency a best-in-class product that will ensure a successful implementation for this project. Much like the Agency accomplishes its mission by implementing creative programs and establishing alliances, NeoTech prides itself on its commitment to meeting the unique needs of our customers thorough the provision of creative technical solutions. Additionally, we engage with every client as thought partners in an alliance rather beyond the more traditional business-client transaction. This partnership serves to encourage a healthy exchange of ideas and open lines of dialog, all with the goal of providing an inspection system that helps housing agencies meet the technical challenge of maintaining compliance and aids in the development of adaptive strategies for maintaining the agency's social identity and commitment.

CONCLUSION

Establishing a commitment to planning for future challenges is well-placed within housing agencies, as the industry takes a fresh look at strategies for improving agency performance within both its managerial and compliance objectives—while at the same time coping with rapidly evolving federal regulations and tightening budget restrictions. Renewing the agency's understanding of its identity and the direction of its housing program is imperative to the agency's efficiency and superior performance within the established federal guidelines—not merely because continued federal funding is connected to qualifying and quantifying these elements of the agency's operations. Success in achieving and maintaining the agency's objectives across the board is fundamental to its core mission—providing safe, decent, and sanitary housing to its participants—and to be blunt, failure at completing this most basic mission is not an option.

While this perspective focuses on one of the most basic aspects of public housing—inspections—its reach into the basic functions of the entire organization runs deep and true. Backing away in our perspective somewhat, the end goal of housing programs issues from the headwaters of HUD and flows through the top positions of an agency, its top management, and throughout the organization through every department, ultimately ending in the home of the tenant. Tenants care little for the complexity of navigating compliance objectives through innovative software, analysis, and application and even less about the distinction between strategic solutions to technical and adaptive challenges. Tenants care about the quality of their housing.

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