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***CHICAGO  
PUBLIC HOUSING SPECIAL***

**INTEGRATION PROVES  
ELUSIVE, CHALLENGING  
UNDER CHA'S PLAN FOR  
TRANSFORMATION**

*by* SHEENA PAYNE

“**W**e’re almost at the end of the road,” said Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) CEO Lewis Jordan, in a speech delivered to the City Club of Chicago in January 2011.<sup>1</sup> The road Jordan was referring to is the CHA’s ambitious Plan for Transformation, which aims to redevelop public housing in

Chicago.<sup>2</sup> The CHA is 5,000 units shy of completing its goal of building or renovating 25,000 units throughout the city.<sup>3</sup>

According to Jordan, “81 percent of total development process had been completed before the housing market took a turn for the worse.”<sup>4</sup> The CHA plans to complete an additional 1,026 units by the end of 2011.<sup>5</sup> However, the Plan’s stated goal of socioeconomic integration for public housing residents within the city lags behind the pace of construction.

In 2000, the CHA launched its Plan for Transformation, touted on its website as “the largest, most ambitious redevelopment effort of public housing in the United States, with the goal of rehabilitating or redeveloping the entire stock of public housing in Chicago.”<sup>6</sup> The plan, initially to be completed in 10 years, was more than a rehabilitation of distressed physical structures; it aimed to transform the lives of public housing residents through “the comprehensive integration of low-income families into the larger physical, social and economic fabric of the city.”<sup>7</sup>

Integration was a key component of the Plan. According to sociologist William Julius Wilson, large public housing developments result in “overwhelmingly impoverished urban neighborhoods, not organized around lawful work.” These developments create “an urban ‘underclass’ threatened with permanent severance from the American mainstream.”<sup>8</sup>

By the CHA’s own admission, crumbling infrastructure and poverty had reached critical concentrations.<sup>9</sup> According to the CHA’S website, prior to the Plan’s enactment, Chicago “had some of the worst housing in America.”<sup>10</sup> Former high-rise housing projects, such as Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes, were known for substandard living conditions, plagued by gang violence, and entrenched with cross-generational poverty.<sup>11</sup> Renowned public interest attorney Alexander Polikoff used the term “residential apartheid” to describe the CHA’s practice of forced separation of housing for poor black and middle class white families.<sup>12</sup>

With the aim of socioeconomic integration, part of the Plan for Transformation calls for demolishing “notorious high-rise developments,” rehabilitating smaller low-density properties, and building new mixed-income developments.<sup>13</sup> The CHA allocated one-third of the units as public housing, one-third as affordable housing and one-third as market-rate housing.<sup>14</sup>

## FAMILIES IN TRANSITION

When the demolition and renovation commenced, residents were granted a Right of Return and provided with four options as units became available: a permanent housing choice voucher, a rehabbed scattered site unit, a rehabbed unit in one of the traditional public housing developments, or a new unit within a mixed housing development.<sup>15</sup>

In the interim, residents were left to find housing through the use of Housing Choice Vouchers, or placement in yet un-rehabbed public housing units.<sup>16</sup> As a result, some argue, residents were simply redistributed into racially segregated neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty, counter to the Plan's stated goal of integration.<sup>17</sup>

According to then Alderman Toni Preckwinkle (4th), the Plan resulted in horizontal concentrations of impoverished residents by neighborhood, while traditional public housing vertically concentrated the poor in high rises.<sup>18</sup> "The problem is that it was all done at once," Preckwinkle stated in a Medill Reports interview.<sup>19</sup> "There wasn't very much thought given as to what was going to happen to people between the time their buildings were torn down and the new buildings were built."<sup>20</sup>

This sentiment was echoed by Henry Rose, law professor at Loyola University Chicago, who referenced the families in the wake of the landmark *Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority*.<sup>21</sup> The *Gautreaux* families used Housing Choice Vouchers to either relocate to integrated areas in the Chicago suburbs or remain in the city.<sup>22</sup> The families who landed in the integrated suburbs had demonstrably better outcomes than those who stayed in the city.<sup>23</sup>

According to Professor Rose, "The families that lived in integrated settings did better. That took planning and counseling services to assist families to make that transition. It takes a lot of planning and resources to accomplish that."<sup>24</sup>

## OUTCOMES FOR RESIDENTS

But with 81 percent of the development process completed, how have residents who exercised their Right of Return to newly constructed or rehabbed units fared? Within mixed-income developments, the CHA has successfully man-

aged to physically place public housing residents into units that are architecturally indistinguishable from market-rate units occupied by non-public housing families.<sup>25</sup>

While furthering the Plan's goal of integration and diversity, tenant experiences in the mixed-income developments vary.<sup>26</sup> Sara Voelker, the project coordinator for a University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration study about mixed-income developments, explained, "We've done interviews with residents of five of the ten sites, and there's a mixed experience. . . There's some tension around who has kids and who doesn't, and how you live in a community where there's these different populations."<sup>27</sup>

Public housing residents' access to these mixed-income developments is limited, however, by the number of available units and stringent application requirements imposed by the CHA and private developers.<sup>28</sup> The CHA adopted a "Minimum Tenant Selection Plan" in 2004 to provide consistency across mixed-income developments, including a minimum monthly rent (\$25), credit and criminal history checks, and a 30-hour-per-week work requirement for all adult household members. Some developments also require drug tests for adult renters.<sup>29</sup>

For residents who returned to rehabilitated traditional public housing units, the Plan's goal of integration has not been fully realized.<sup>30</sup> The CHA aimed to bring traditional properties to "a standard of quality sufficient to attract a mix of incomes so that public housing does not again become home to extreme concentrations of poverty."<sup>31</sup> To this end, it imposed work requirements on residents coupled with extensive support services to "ensure a better quality of life for tenants and the surrounding communities alike."<sup>32</sup>

In practice, however, newly rehabilitated communities like Altgeld Gardens are still plagued by violence, gang activity, and drug dealing.<sup>33</sup> According to Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, "Families in rehabilitated units live adjacent to block upon block of ugly, boarded-up buildings."<sup>34</sup> As a result, CHA has encountered difficulty relocating residents to the community, and has failed to attract non-public housing residents.<sup>35</sup>

One public housing resident considering relocation to Altgeld attended an open house and returned at night to find drug dealers operating openly, prostitutes walking the street, and "virtually no police."<sup>36</sup> While the CHA's Plan for

physical transformation is nearly complete, escaping its past of concentrated poverty, isolation, and crime will prove far more difficult. The extent of socio-economic integration of public housing residents within the city will be the true measure of transformation.

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NOTES

1 Emily Wilensky, *Lewis Jordan: Plan for Transformation 10 years in*, WBEZ, Jan. 24, 2011, available at <http://www.wbez.org/story/chicago-housing-authority/lewis-jordan-plan-transformation-10-years#>.

2 *Id.*

3 *Id.*

4 *Id.*

5 *Id.*

6 About CHA, Chicago Housing Authority, available at [http://www.thecha.org/pages/about\\_cha/18.php](http://www.thecha.org/pages/about_cha/18.php) (last visited Mar. 25, 2011).

7 *Id.*

8 Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, *The Third Side: A Mid-Course Report on Chicago's Transformation of Public Housing*, 13, (2009), available at <http://www.bpichicago.org/THETHIRDSIDE.9-03-09.pdf>.

9 About CHA, *supra* note 6.

10 Rachel Lazar, *The Transformation*, CHI. WEEKLY, Mar. 2, 2011, available at <http://chicago-weekly.net/2011/03/02/the-transformation/>.

11 *Id.*

12 Polikoff Combats "Residential Apartheid" with Gautreaux, *Sacrifices Inner City Shelter Needs For Open Housing Goal*, CHI. REP., Mar. 1978, available at [http://www.howardfairhousing.org/civil\\_rights\\_school/125/507](http://www.howardfairhousing.org/civil_rights_school/125/507).

13 About CHA, *supra* note 6.

14 Marisol Rodriguez, *CHA Plan for Transformation Poses Challenges for Bronzeville*, MEDILL REPORTS, Mar. 20, 2008, available at <http://news.medill.northwestern.edu/chicago/news.aspx?id=84621>.

15 Lazar, *supra* note 10.

16 Lawrence J. Vale & Erin Graves, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Urban Studies and Planning, *The Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation: What Does the Research Show So Far?*, 50-52, (2010) available at [http://www.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7Bb0386ce3-8b29-4162-8098-e466fb856794%7D/VALEGRAVES\\_CHA\\_PFT\\_FINAL-REPORT.PDF](http://www.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7Bb0386ce3-8b29-4162-8098-e466fb856794%7D/VALEGRAVES_CHA_PFT_FINAL-REPORT.PDF).

17 Rodriguez, *supra* note 14.

18 *Id.*

19 *Id.*

20 *Id.*

21 *Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority*, 296 F. Supp. 907 (N.D. Ill. 1969).

22 Telephone Interview with Henry Rose, Professor Loyola University Chicago School of Law (Mar. 25 2011).

23 *Id.*

- 24 *Id.*  
25 Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, *supra* note 8 at 26.  
26 Lazar, *supra* note 10.  
27 *Id.*  
28 *Id.*  
29 Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, *supra* note 8 at 26.  
30 *Id.* at 37.  
31 *Id.*  
32 *Id.*  
33 *Id.* at 39.  
34 *Id.*  
35 *Id.*  
36 Jason Grotto et al., *Public Housing's Island*, CHI. TRIB., October 10, 2008, available at <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-altgeldoct10,0,1345283.story?page=1>.