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The Plan for Transformation: How a plan with lofty goals has underperformed and forever changed public housing in Chicago

Kenya Barbara

Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) is the third largest public housing agency in America.¹ It was founded in 1937 for the purpose of owning and operating public housing that was built through President Roosevelt's Public Works Administration.² What began as transitional housing for World War II veterans and their families eventually became many different public housing developments all over the city. At one point, CHA was the biggest landlord in Chicago with over 40,000 units of housing.³ With these high numbers, came a high number of problems. Developments such as Cabrini Green, Robert Taylor Homes, Dearborn Homes, and Lathrop Homes, became concentrated areas of poverty riddled with gang violence, crime and despair. These 'projects' as they were colloquially called, were at one point included in the list of the most dangerous and poor communities in the United States.⁴ Things got so out of control that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) took control of CHA in 1995 in an effort to get the agency and public housing in Chicago back on track.⁵

Accordingly, in 1999, CHA regained control and launched the Plan for Transformation. A plan which in its simplest form called for the demolition of the worst of CHA's housing projects and replacing them with a variety of options including mixed-income housing and housing choice vouchers (section 8).⁶ This plan, which was brokered by Mayor Richard M. Daley, meant the demolition of nearly 18,000 units of public housing and the promise of reconstructing or renovating 25,000 units over the course of five to seven years.⁷ To carry out the plan, CHA and HUD entered into a ten-year "Moving to Work"

¹ *About*, CHICAGO HOUSING AUTHORITY, <https://www.thecha.org/about> (last accessed November, 2018).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Susan J. Popkin, *Hard Lessons from Chicago's public housing reform*, CITY LAB (February 7, 2017) <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/02/hard-lessons-from-chicagos-public-housing-reform/515934/>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Jake Brittle, *Redeveloping the State Street Corridor*, SOUTHSIDE WEEKLY (January 31, 2017), <https://southsideweekly.com/chicago-unfulfilled-promise-rebuild-public-housing/>.

agreement where CHA was given the freedom to spend federal money however needed in order to reach the goals of the plan.⁸ The plan was believed to be the answer to all of the problems existing in the public housing projects owned by CHA. It would cure the segregation and concentrated poverty, it would also promote self-sufficiency and ultimately lead to more residents moving out of public housing as they would no longer need it.⁹ As Mayor Daley put it in 2006, “We’re not just building homes. We’re building lives and building communities. And. . .we’re rebuilding souls.”¹⁰ Arguably, that is a lot to build in five to seven years so it should come as no surprise that CHA had not finished with all of their building by the time their initial deadline came around. And now, as CHA has just renewed the moving to work agreement yet again, it is worth it to explore this plan and figure out whether or not it has been successful thus far.

The first thing that CHA promised was that this plan would be complete in five to seven years. This has not happened, and in fact, next year will mark twenty years since the Plan for Transformation was undertaken. However, the fact that CHA has had multiple extensions given to them while attempting to carry out the Plan for Transformation is not dispositive to the question of the program’s success. But it does, at minimum, indicate that CHA did not understand or appreciate just how extensive and difficult this task would be. Consequently, CHA has asked to get rid of some of the earlier rules in addition to the extra time so that they can meet their goal. However, these changes and deviations leave the goal that CHA will ultimately meet looking very different from the original one. For example, though CHA claims to be close to the goal of 25,000 apartments to replace the ones demolished, only 11,000 will be set aside for families which is almost a third fewer than originally promised.¹¹ Additionally, even some of the successes CHA is claiming in terms of housing units are misleading. This can be seen in CHA counting hundreds of apartments toward its Plan for Transformation numbers even though they are privately owned or were built and rehabbed and used for CHA tenants long

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ David Schalliol, *The Plan for Transformation has transformed Chicago’s Built environment*, THE CHICAGO READER (September 19, 2017), <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/plan-for-transformation-public-housing-photo-essay-cha-architecture-biennial/Content?oid=30833806>.

¹⁰ Brittle, *supra* note 6.

¹¹ Mick Dumke, *Years Late, With Big Gaps, CHA Nears end of Housing Transformation*, CHICAGO SUN TIMES (September 3, 2017), <https://chicago.suntimes.com/feature/years-late-with-big-gaps-cha-nears-end-of-housing-transformation/>.

before the plan was even announced.¹² These misleading numbers allow CHA to brag about almost being done with the transformation and meeting its promises when in fact many would argue they are even further from that goal than when they began.

Unit numbers aside, CHA has also left unfulfilled the promise to move displaced residents out of their cauldrons of concentrated poverty into mixed-income areas where residents could look to affluent neighbors for motivation.¹³ This goal remains unmet. The Plan for Transformation put forward three options for residents moving out of buildings on demolition lists: housing choice vouchers where residents could rent from private landlords, mixed income housing whereby residents would no longer be isolated by their poverty and improved public housing.¹⁴ None of these options have great success in accomplishing their stated goals.

Mixed-income housing is riddled with many obstacles for residents before they can move into a unit. For starters, there are not many mixed-income units to offer to residents. Of the 18,000 new or renovated units to be built or built under the Plan for Transformation only 3,000 of them are mixed income units.¹⁵ Additionally, each mixed-income building has specific criteria for tenants hoping to rent or own.¹⁶ These include job and income verification, credit checks and background checks.¹⁷ These restrictions may sound routine but for people already battling poverty they can prove to be defeating.¹⁸ For example, when Cabrini Green began to be demolished half of the residents were unemployed.¹⁹ These obstacles led to many residents ending up in neighborhoods not much different from the one they were being forced out from.²⁰ Furthermore, much of the mixed income housing is still not located in diverse communities. Six out of the ten neighborhoods that gained the most CHA families over the past eighteen years are majority African-American and two others are majority Hispanic; not one of the neighborhoods is majority

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Emily Magnusen, *The Fight to Stay Cabrini Green*, LOYOLA PUBLIC INTEREST LAW REPORTER, 16 Pub. Interest L. Rptr. 176, (2011).

¹⁴ Debra Bruno, *How Chicago Learned Privatizing Public Housing Isn't Enough*, POLITICO (July 20, 2017), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/20/how-chicago-learned-privatizing-public-housing-isnt-enough-215399>.

¹⁵ Magnusen, *supra* note 12.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

white.²¹ Also, more than half of the apartments for CHA families in Chicago are located in just seven of 77 neighborhoods.²² And lastly, of those 77 neighborhoods, 27 have less than 10 CHA families – a number that is the same as in 2000.²³ Not much has changed.

In addition to the mixed income units, CHA also utilized the voucher program to relocate residents.²⁴ CHA currently oversees 47,000 vouchers in the private market.²⁵ Vouchers are believed to provide more options on where to live for families, since the rent is subsidized by the government, the belief is that you could live anywhere.²⁶ However, the amount that the federal government is willing to pay for each voucher limits those with one on where they can actually move.²⁷ Generally, the designated amount is not enough for a home in a diverse neighborhood equipped with better schools and less crime.²⁸ Additionally, the landlords who were willing to take vouchers usually were not in the sort of mixed neighborhoods CHA was hoping to move residents to.²⁹ Instead, they were in poor and racially segregated ones.³⁰ Ultimately, the vouchers did no more than steer residents into more of the same just with different zip codes.³¹

Not only did the relocation not provide residents with the better surroundings that they were promised, but it also stripped them of the community and support systems that they were used to.³² A good example of this would be the story of Annie Jeffrey Ricks.³³ Ms. Ricks lived in Cabrini for twenty years until she was forced out due to the transformation plan.³⁴ She ended up in another public housing unit in the Wentworth Gardens located in the Bronzeville neighborhood.³⁵ There she and her family were met with re-

²¹ Dumke, *supra* note 10.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Ben Austen, *The Towers Came Down, and With Them the Promise of Public Housing*, THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE (February 6, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/magazine/the-towers-came-down-and-with-them-the-promise-of-public-housing.html>.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

sidents who did not want Cabrini Green transplants there and a gang community hellbent on tormenting her sons.³⁶ It got so bad that ultimately, they ended up doubling up with family in a different community.³⁷ Annie tried unsuccessfully to get transferred but ultimately died before that ever happened.³⁸ Once relocated, she was forgotten about.³⁹

I was able to speak with journalist and author Ben Austen extensively about Cabrini Green, its uniqueness in telling the story of public housing in Chicago, and where housing in Chicago goes from here. Cabrini Green started as a set of rowhouses.⁴⁰ This development eventually grew to include many high-rise buildings and a total of 3,607 units at its peak.⁴¹ Originally Cabrini was integrated, consisting of Italian families as well as Black families.⁴² But as racist policies began to take over public housing, Italian families were moved out and it became pretty much exclusively Black.⁴³ This eventually made it easier to deny the residents of Cabrini many resources including maintenance and access to social services.⁴⁴ Gangs, drugs and violence began to overtake Cabrini.⁴⁵ Its reputation began to precede it and for many it became a textbook example of everything that was wrong with public housing in Chicago and in the country at large.⁴⁶ Mr. Austen echoed this sentiment when asked about what peaked his interest in Cabrini. “Cabrini was this symbol of all things scary in the city” he said.⁴⁷

While being scary and “larger than life” as Mr. Austen stated, Cabrini was also confusing because of its location.⁴⁸ Located walking distance to downtown and Lincoln Park, it was always odd to people that Cabrini was allowed to be what it was, where it was.⁴⁹ Most of the other CHA projects were tucked away

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Interview with Ben Austen.

⁴¹ Drew Reed, *The 20 year battle to demolish Chicago's notorious Cabrini-Green housing project*, CITYMETRIC (November 17, 2015), <https://www.citymetric.com/skylines/20-year-battle-demolish-chicago-s-notorious-cabrini-green-housing-project-1575>.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ Austen Interview.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

in primarily poor and black neighborhoods so they never stuck out.⁵⁰ But in the case of Cabrini many felt, as Mr. Austen put it, “this was too close to the Gold Coast, this is just not how Chicago works.”⁵¹ And as Mr. Austen stated in his interview, people were always afraid of Cabrini being taken away.⁵² And eventually it was.⁵³ Cabrini was a prime target of the Plan for Transformation.⁵⁴ And though residents fought back with lawsuits, organizing and protests, it ultimately met the same fate of Robert Taylor Homes, Henry Horner Homes and the like.⁵⁵

So, what did the loss of Cabrini means for us locally? Mr. Austen believes that it shows some ugly things about us as a city and a country.⁵⁶ He said that it shows “a distaste and dislike for government subsidy programs and that distaste has rooted in the mainstream.”⁵⁷ “By the 1990s even the democrats were saying to get rid of these programs.”⁵⁸ Mr. Austen thinks that the loss of Cabrini and the transformation altogether points to the country’s issues “not just with class but race.”⁵⁹ And in Chicago, this loss also holds a mirror up to the transformation of the City and how it is being turned inside out again.⁶⁰ As Ben Austen put it “the towers came during white flight and are gone during white return.”⁶¹

What about the success of the plan? Did Mr. Austen believe that the communities got better after public housing as we knew it transformed? Short answer would be yes and no. “When Mayor Daley first announced the plan for transformation he talked about bettering neighborhoods but who benefits more, the people in the public housing or the neighborhood?”⁶² He continued “If you go to Cabrini today, the neighborhood got better but by and large the people did not.”⁶³

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ Reed, *supra* note 41.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ Austen Interview.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.*

Getting rid of Cabrini and similar housing also took a lot of power away from residents. It is easier to organize when all the people you need to organize are consolidated into this one community or area. But now that projects are gone and people are spread out in private renting and scattered sites, it's more difficult to try and organize and unite many voices behind one goal. As asked by Mr. Austen "how does this voice of 100,000 people [spread around the city] become a voting block?" The answer to that question and many others remains to be seen.

As for other promises of the Plan for Transformation such as a decrease of crime in the city, the results remain mixed. In a Chicago Magazine article, the author explored whether the destruction of Cabrini Green simply moved crime outwards.⁶⁴ In a study conducted by Susan Popkin it was shown that in neighborhoods with a high density of relocated households the violent and property crime rate is 21% higher than it would have been without the public housing transformation.⁶⁵ That percentage goes down as the density of relocated families goes down.⁶⁶ This trend is also reflected in the neighborhoods of former public housing.⁶⁷ In those neighborhoods between 2000 and 2008, violent crime decreased by 60%, property crime by 49%, and gun crime by 70%. But in the city overall those numbers are way smaller: 1% in violent crime, 0.3% in property and 4.4% in gun crime.⁶⁸ This shows that in many respects the transformation only moved crime out across the city.⁶⁹ It moved the problem of one community to many different communities.⁷⁰

Overall, the transformation of public housing in Chicago has not been as successful as it was hoped to be. Crime is still rampant in the city and relocated people still find themselves living in areas riddled with poverty. Furthermore, the city is watching more and more families join the list of those hopeful to receive the help of public housing. The transformation changed the location of problems but the problems continue to persist. So, what's next for public housing in Chicago? "Much larger investment. There is such a stigma on pub-

⁶⁴ Whet Moser, *Did the Destruction of Chicago's Public Housing Decrease Violent Crime, Or Just Move It Elsewhere?*, CHICAGO MAGAZINE (April 5, 2012), <http://www.chicagogamag.com/Chicago-Magazine/The-312/April-2012/Did-the-Destruction-of-Chicagos-Public-Housing-Decrease-Violent-Crime-Or-Just-Move-It-Elsewhere/>.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *Id.*

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lic housing and no funding coming in. There has to be some other ways to go about this” said Mr. Ben Austen when asked. For the sake of the many residents uprooted and the many others hoping to receive help, one can only hope.

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