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***CHICAGO
PUBLIC HOUSING SPECIAL***

**ARE YOU THERE,
MAYOR EMANUEL? IT'S ME,
CHICAGO PUBLIC HOUSING**

by AILEEN CHE

Since 1937, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) has received both praise and criticism for its self-stated efforts to “create vibrant mixed-income/mixed-finance neighborhoods, help low-income residents achieve self-sufficiency, and provide affordable housing options in a time of need.”¹ The public housing community is now looking to recently elected Mayor Rahm Emanuel,

once the CHA's vice-chairman,² to refocus the CHA and better serve residents in transition.³

THE PAST

In 1937, Chicago Mayor Edward Kelly established the CHA as a means to manage and operate federally funded housing built under President Franklin Roosevelt's Public Works Administration.⁴ The agency emerged on the progressive forefront, becoming an early advocate of housing reform and civil rights for African Americans.⁵ Between 1937 and 1945, the CHA planned nine projects totaling 6,300 units, 62 percent of which were subsequently occupied by African Americans at a time when blacks comprised of only 15 percent of the city's population.⁶

Even though the CHA had become the largest landlord in Chicago,⁷ by the early 1980s, "inoperable elevators, erratic heat, leaky roofs, uncollected garbage, infested apartments, darkened hallways, and unrepaired playground equipment" were normal at its properties.⁸ Chicago's first African-American mayor, Harold Washington, considered the high-rise projects "obscene . . . an abomination," in which no remedy was available—"Nobody can make the CHA work . . . The only solution is just to get of it."⁹ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) subsequently gave the CHA failing grades, placing them on its troubled list.¹⁰

In 1994, HUD Housing Secretary Henry Cisneros spent a night at the Robert Taylor Homes, a housing project on the south side of Chicago, and the conditions he experienced caused him to embrace a federal takeover of CHA.¹¹ Cisneros lamented, "I don't know another place in America where there are fifteen shootings and five killings over a weekend."¹² CHA officials voted to accept a temporary federal takeover one year later.¹³

By 1997, the CHA received a clean audit from HUD, the first in ten years, allowing the city to regain control of its public housing and to implement an aggressive plan that called for the complete overhaul of the CHA.¹⁴

However, as Mayor Emanuel has repeatedly emphasized, "While conditions have improved vastly for most, this has not always been a painless transition for residents and communities."¹⁵

THE PRESENT

Since 1995, the CHA has contemplated the mass demolition of Chicago public housing, and in 2000, it finally reached an agreement with HUD on a redevelopment plan backed by Mayor Daley, known as the Plan for Transformation.¹⁶ Set for a period of ten years, the Plan called for the demolition of approximately 18,500 CHA apartments and 5,800 family units, the renovation of all 9,500 senior apartments, and the constriction of 6,200 units in mixed-income communities.¹⁷ The Plan sought to fully integrate public housing residents into the city of Chicago— socially, economically, and physically.¹⁸ It was to be “a triple transformation,” reaching people, locations, and the CHA itself.¹⁹



The Cabrini-Green housing development comes down as the CHA attempts to integrate its former residents into the city.

As with any ambitious goal, the Plan has faced a number of setbacks. “CHA finds itself in an interesting situation as [the Plan] was supposed to be completed in ten years,” William Wilen, an attorney with the Shriver Center, explained.²⁰ “But it is now looking as though it is going to take fifteen or more.”²¹

Nevertheless, Mayor Emanuel continues to stand behind the plan he helped create, underlining that it “has allowed Chicago to move beyond the failed

experiments of the 1950s that gave us concentrations of high rise public housing projects isolated in poor neighborhoods, plagued by crime and unsafe conditions for residents.”²²

“The goal is to achieve economic self-sufficiency for residents in neighborhoods that are better integrated into the broader community,” Mayor Emanuel stressed, “but this cannot solely be the government’s responsibility. We must continue to encourage and stimulate private sector investment, and wide community participation and acceptance for this to be a success.”²³

THE FUTURE

With a past built on uncertainty and lack of accountability, distrust in the CHA has grown rampant among the public housing community.²⁴ As Maria Hibbs, Executive Director of the Partnership for New Communities, stressed, “A reputation of corruption, mismanagement, and deplorable performance is difficult for any institution to live down.”²⁵

The mayor remains confident, stating that “with any bold plan. . . there are plenty of things that need to be improved as we continue to learn from the experience, listen to the residents impacted and adjust to the market realities of the current housing crisis.”²⁶

Mayor Emanuel has announced the next stage of the Plan for Transformation, which includes Lathrop Homes in the Roscoe Village neighborhood.²⁷ “[W]e have only one chance to get this right,” he said. “We must continue to listen to residents and community leaders to develop the right plan that will alter the landscape for future generations and make our entire city stronger.”²⁸

Many Chicagoans continue to be hopeful for the future of public housing. As Hibbs stated, “Given that [Emanuel] was a CHA commissioner at one time, he is familiar with its challenges. . . I think that bodes well for not only the Plan, but also for the city and the broader challenges it faces at this time.”²⁹

Ultimately, affordable housing options will prove to be critical to the health of the city.³⁰ Thus, while the future of Chicago public housing is still largely unknown, the plight of the public housing community remains a major issue for the new mayor. As Mayor Emanuel embraces his new authority, he is going

to be faced with the inevitable uphill battle with the issues of the city's public housing.

NOTES

1 Lewis A. Jordan, Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Housing Authority, A Message from the CEO, *available at* http://www.thecha.org/pages/ceo_statement/122.php (last visited March 24, 2011).

2 Fran Speilman, *Big Problems, Painful Solutions Could Seal Emanuel's Fate as One-Termer*, CHI. SUN-TIMES, March 22, 2011, *available at* <http://www.suntimes.com/3857315-417/big-problems-painful-solutions-could-seal-emanuels-fate-as-one-termer.html>.

3 *Id.*

4 D. Bradford Hunt, BLUEPRINT FOR DISASTER: THE UNRAVELING OF CHICAGO PUBLIC HOUSING 36 (2009); See also *About CHA*, Chicago Housing Authority, *available at* http://www.thecha.org/pages/about_cha/18.php (last visited March 24, 2011).

5 *Id.* at 36.

6 *Id.* at 65.

7 Chicago Housing Authority, *supra* note 4.

8 Hunt, *supra* note 4, at 259.

9 *Id.* at 261.

10 *Id.* at 264.

11 *Id.* at 277.

12 Neil Steinberg, *Cisneros: CHA May Be Most Violent / HUD Chief Spends Night At the Robert Taylor Homes*, CHI. SUN-TIMES, April 12, 1994.

13 Hunt, *supra* note 8, at 278-79.

14 *Id.* at 279.

15 *Mayor: Rahm Emanuel*, CHI. SUN-TIMES, Jan. 11, 2011, *available at* <http://www.suntimes.com/news/elections/questionnaires/3292153-418/story.html>.

16 William Wilen, *The Horner Model: Successfully Redeveloping Public Housing*, 1 NW J. L. & SOC. POL'Y 62, 89 (2006), *available at* <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/journals/njls/v1/n1/3/>; *The Plan for Transformation*, CHI. HOUSING AUTH., *available at* http://www.thecha.org/pages/the_plan_for_transformation/22.php. (last visited March 24, 2011).

17 *Id.*; Hunt, *supra* note 4, at 279.

18 Lawrence J. Vale & Erin Graves, *The Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation: What Does the Research Show So Far?*, DEPT. OF URBAN STUDIES AND PLANNING AT MIT 6 (2010), *available at* http://web.mit.edu/dusp/dusp_extension_unsec/people/faculty/ljv/vale_macarthur_2010.pdf.

19 *Id.*

20 Phone Interview with Bill Willen, attorney with the Shriver Center (March 16, 2011).

21 *Id.*

22 CHI. SUN-TIMES, *supra* note 15.

23 *Id.*

24 Susan J. Popkin, *No Simple Solutions: Housing CHA's Most Vulnerable Families*, 1 NW J. L. & SOC. POL'Y 62, 156 (2006), *available at* <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/journals/njls/v1/n1/7/index.htm>.

- 25 Email Interview with Maria Hibbs, Executive Director of the Partnership for New Communities (March 15, 2011).
- 26 CHI. SUN-TIMES, *supra* note 15.
- 27 Hunt, *supra* note 4.
- 28 *Id.*
- 29 Hibbs, *supra* note 25.
- 30 CHI. SUN-TIMES, *supra* note 15.