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The cost of being poor in America is taxing. Often, low-income individuals are shuffled into unsafe neighborhoods with high crime rates. These neighborhoods often have dilapidated and vacant buildings. The neighborhoods may be havens for drugs, violence, and crime. Access to healthy food is scarce, as most poor communities have “food deserts”. Many schools in these neighborhoods struggle with overcrowding, behavioral issues, and accreditation. They may have teachers who are stressed and have access to few resources. Many people who live in these neighborhoods do not have premium healthcare. As a result, they suffer from high rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, and other life-threatening diseases. It costs a lot to be poor in America.

In the past, public housing has been considered a safety net to help people who are at risk of becoming homeless. Public housing was originally developed in 1937 to house low-income families. Units are typically owned and managed by local public housing authorities (PHAs) who hold a contract with the federal government. Families pay no more than 30% of their adjusted gross income for rent, while the agency takes care of maintenance and upkeep. During the 1980s and 1990s, public housing development began to decline and has since ceased. The decrease in capital funding has led to unaffordability and systematic disrepair. In turn, many housing



authorities have begun to demolish and dispose of their public housing stock. Unfortunately, the Housing Authority of St. Louis County (HASLC) is no stranger to this.

Today capital fund programs are inadequate. There is so much deferred maintenance in public housing that it's almost impossible to maintain the current housing stock. Therefore, housing authorities apply for demolition/disposition applications and the units are demolished because it is inadequate and obsolete. Tenants who live in subsidized units set for demolition will receive a tenant protection voucher. Many are happy to leave. They get to move into different neighborhoods and put their children into better school districts. Sometimes when we get our clients to move into the Section 8 program, they're dealing with private landlords for the first time where there are different rules. Now our relocated residents may be experiencing something different- it's a different world with private landlords who potentially could be slumlords. People then ask themselves, "How do I work my way through this new process, which is something that I've never dealt with before?"

Lately, the Wellston Public Housing Authority has garnered much attention. It has been recommended that the housing stock be demolished, and residents given tenant protection vouchers. Wellston is 1 of 92 municipalities in St. Louis. It currently has 201 units of public housing, which HASLC absorbed at the request of HUD. Currently, the units are in substantial disrepair and require almost 14.5 million dollars to repair and maintain. Many of the residents in these units are negatively impacted by the physical conditions and the surrounding environment. During a 2016 reportⁱⁱⁱ, a former resident discussed her living conditions with researchers. She cited holes in the walls due to rodents, and severe pest infestation. Her children subsequently



acquired asthma and breathing problems and were restricted from playing outside due to the constant gunfire and violence.

Like many public housing communities, Wellston is situated in a “food desert.” A Google search indicated that the nearest supermarket is approximately 7 miles away from the center of Wellston. Residents without vehicles must rely on public transportation to reach the supermarket. A 2016 study from Washington University highlighted the detrimental effects that food deserts have on low-income communities. Researchers found that areas with high poverty rates are more likely to have fast food, convenience, and liquor stores, but few supermarkets and banks.^v A former Wellston resident told researchers that she stopped cooking and turned to fast food at a nearby shop. This cost her more money but was more accessible.^{vi} Many public housing residents in Wellston face similar situations.

Transportation becomes another issue as reflected in the comments that were just made about hunger and food deserts, as well as working families. Approximately 20 miles from downtown St. Louis, there was public housing development called Valley Park. Valley Park has become an oasis because of highways built around it. An 18-year-old young resident walked down the median of a four-lane highway to get to work, because there are no bus stops close to her apartment. Her working hours did not coincide with any of the express buses going in the direction she was traveling. Therefore, she walked down the highway for two miles to get to the Burger King for a \$7.50 hourly wage^{vii}. Although she was terrified of the large trucks that went by on the highway, she was determined to do what was best for her family and for herself. Unfortunately, local housing authorities were not brought to the table with Metro or other



agencies responsible for public transportation. There was no discussion about how to make sure that our residents still had access to inexpensive transportation. A local reporter later questioned the Metro Transit System about the need for a bus stop. The organization responded that putting a stop closer to the Valley Park public housing would “take away from someone else who needed a stop.”^{viii}

Housing in St. Louis is a critical topic. Public housing has been one of many ways to address the housing crisis in our area. Unfortunately, public housing stock has historically been neglected. Many PHAs record astounding losses regarding deferred maintenance. This lack of upkeep can contribute to health concerns for residents of public housing. Studies have shown that residents of defunct and derelict public housing units are more likely to experience poor health related to heating and ventilation issues, pest infestation, and mold and fungus.^{ix} Many of our residents have complained of severe bed bug infestations, mice, and other vermin.

However, this is not just a “public housing” issue. PHAs who issue Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) often encounter landlords who house tenants in sub-standard units. In 2018 when TEH Realty was brought to my attention, I did what has become my signature response: I went to the management office and spoke to clients. My inspection revealed units that I would not feel comfortable having a family member live in.

During this time, TEH owned approximately 2400 units in the St. Louis area and received over a million dollars in subsidy payments. Although TEH was contacted by HASLC (and residents) and subsequently informed of the necessary maintenance, TEH continued to accept voucher payments from HASLC while refusing to make repairs. In 2019, HASLC terminated its



landlord agreement and refused to accept new vouchers for any TEH properties.^x The Housing Authority of Kansas City has done likewise.^{xi}

Healthcare is a prominent component of the puzzle. Since 2017 HASLC and the St. Louis City Housing Authority have collaborated to offer a mobility program to HCV tenants. This program helps tenants find housing in middle-income neighborhoods. The goal of this program is to help deconcentrate poverty and provide tenants with access to neighborhoods with higher opportunity. Research surrounding this program has shown that residents who partake in the program often exhibit lower rates of diabetes, obesity, major depression, and toxic stress^{xii xiii}. Reports have also shown that mobility programs help to lower the odds of in-patient hospitalizations.^{xiv}

In the future we need to be more creative. There need to be dedicated Community Liaisons joining housing authorities to various departments of our government such as the agriculture department so community gardens could be funded and become a source of food not only for our residents but for the greater community. The Liaison could join us to the Transportation department to spur economic development around specific neighborhoods that are in need.

HUD needs to be given more autonomy to force multi-jurisdiction vouchers. In St. Louis City and County vouchers move across jurisdiction lines making it easy for residents to move freely from one jurisdiction to another. This has proven to be very successful with our Mobility Program and our program has become a national model.



We need to continue to have demonstration programs like the UPCSV that is looking at standardizing HQS inspections at a higher level than what is in place. In this area HUD should have autonomy over what might pass as acceptable by local governments.

And finally, local HUD offices must be staffed with personnel who are proactive and willing to know the faces of the people we serve and to serve in anyway possible.

ⁱSee: (The 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, 2018)

ⁱⁱSee: (2018 Point in Time & Housing Inventory Counts St. Louis County CoC & St. Louis City Coc, 2019) ⁱⁱⁱSee:

(Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide, 2018) ^{iv}See: (Food Access Research Atlas, 2019) ^v See:(For the Sake of All: Civic Education on the Social Determinants of Health and Health Disparities in St. Louis,

2016) ^{vi}See: (For the Sake of All: Civic Education on the Social Determinants of Health and Health Disparities in St. Louis,

2016) ^{vii}See: (In Valley Park, Public Housing Means Less Crime but More Transportation Challenges,

2014) ^{viii}See: (Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide, 2018)

^{ix}See: (Is Public Housing the Cause of Poor Health or a Safety Net for the Unhealthy Poor?, 2010) ^xSee: (TEH Termination Notice, 2019)

^{xi}See: (KC Housing Authority Prevents New Leases to TEH Landlords, 2019)

^{xii}See: (Long-term neighborhood effects on long-income families: Evidence from move to opportunity., 2013)

^{xiii}See: (Excessive stress disrupts the architecture of the developing brain, 2014) ^{xiv}See: (What are the Effects of Neighborhood Poverty on Healthcare Utilization? Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment., 2018)