



**Community
Learning
Centers:**

Investing in Multifamily Excellence

Plus: MY KIND OF TOWN – SYRACUSE
THE STATE OF THE ART IN VIRGINIA
INVESTING IN LEADERS: ACHIEVING RESULTS
REDEMPTION IN MAHOGANY: FOR WANT OF A SPRINKLER HEAD

Community Learning Centers: Investing in Multifamily Excellence

BY KENNETH D. WADE



Kenneth D. Wade

In NeighborWorks® multifamily developments, resident services are one of the key strategies for investing in multifamily excellence, along with real-estate preservation and development, and asset management. The key strategy for delivering resident services is a community learning center.

Learning centers are the focal point of a community, offering numerous programs that enable residents to attain their personal and asset-growth goals. Learning center staff assesses community needs and designs outcome-based programs that target specific needs which may vary among different locations. The services focus on personal asset building, creating a culture of opportunity for families and individuals within the context of affordable multifamily properties.

Learning centers may be located either in a property, or in the neighborhood contiguous to smaller and scattered-site properties.

“Outcome-based services” include after-school tutoring and computer access to improve grades and test scores; individual development account (IDA) services to increase family savings; financial fitness and homebuyer preparation to facilitate home purchases; employment training to increase employment options; and leadership training to develop community leaders and increase neighborhood security.

The impact of learning programs on low-income residents has become the subject of increased study in recent years. Private and public institutions such as the Ford Foundation; The Enterprise Foundation; the Departments of Education, Commerce, Health and Human Services; and Housing and Urban Development have investing resources in community learning centers strategically located in areas accessible to low-income households. The purpose of these centers is to advance educational and employment opportunities. To date, more than 2,000 learning centers are aligned with national organizations such as HUD’s Neighborhood Networks, CTCNet, and America Connects.

To define and improve the impact of the learning center industry, Neighborhood Reinvestment created the Learning Center Consortium, a membership organization of housing-based learning center nonprofits, to document and share measured outcomes and best practices and to build industry standards for the learning center community. Neighborhood Reinvestment has played an important role in the coordination and facilitation of this Consortium, investing grants to support the participation of NeighborWorks® organizations as well as providing technical assistance and training to member organizations.

Linking housing and education can be particularly powerful in the life of a low-income family, where challenges of transportation, after-school childcare for younger siblings, and parental language and educational barriers can often result in the failure of school-based after-school programs. Over time, the NeighborWorks® Multifamily Initiative will examine the correlation of success at the learning centers with successful property performance.

Learning centers bring the American dream home to multifamily housing settings.

Kenneth D. Wade is Neighborhood Reinvestment’s executive director.

NeighborWorks® *bright ideas*
Since 1982.

This quarterly publication of the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation assists NeighborWorks® network organizations in their mission to rebuild and revitalize communities. Our intent is to publish success stories and innovative strategies from network organizations and provide information to help community development organizations better serve their communities.

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At the heart of Foundation Communities' Sierra Ridge Apartments, the learning center (right) is close to the pool, laundry room, and mail boxes.

COURTESY FOUNDATION COMMUNITIES



Community Learning Centers

A Key Strategy for Delivering Multifamily Resident Services

BY ROBIN BRADFORD

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM WEBB

Mornings at the Sierra Ridge Community Learning Center are deceptively quiet. Coordinator Melanie Curiel checks e-mail, while Norma, a resident volunteer, sorts food for the emergency food pantry in the main classroom. Around 10 a.m., preschoolers trail in with their parents, eager to play and learn English in the preschool classroom. At noon,

a resident stops in with news about a new job. Another shows up for a credit counseling appointment.

Three o'clock is when the place gets hopping. Today about 50 kids file in after school, stuff their backpacks into cubbies, sit in the bright red chairs, and get going on homework. They know the drill. When they finish (or read, if they have no homework), it's snack time. After that they'll get to play on the computer and go outside for kick ball.

The noise level is high but everyone is "on task," and though Melanie and her staff may not be aware of it right now, they are keeping kids safe, reducing the neighborhood drop-out rate, and planting seeds for academic success in kids whose parents often did not finish high school.

At 6 p.m., the last after-schooler leaves, but the day's not yet over. Erika Leos, who oversees adult learning programs, greets her evening English as a Second Language class,

This prekindergarten classroom at Sierra Ridge bustles most mornings when preschoolers raised in mostly Spanish-speaking households gather to learn skills to prepare them for kindergarten.

COURTESY FOUNDATION COMMUNITIES



while Rick, a community volunteer, makes last-minute preparations for his GED class. While people type away in the computer lab, staff member Karen Lyons puts out snacks for her homeownership course students.

Finally, at 9:45 p.m., Erika locks the doors. It's another day at **Foundation Communities'** Sierra Ridge Community Learning Center in Austin, Texas, where 100 people have connected with the resources they need right where they live. The site is a participating member of the Neighborhood Reinvestment Learning Center Consortium.

Now, multiply this day by seven Foundation Communities learning centers in three cities and you begin to get Foundation Communities' commitment to delivering multifamily resident services through learning centers at Sierra Ridge and the 11 other affordable housing communities it owns and manages.

In NeighborWorks® multifamily developments, resident services are one of the key strategies for investing in multifamily excellence – along with real-estate preservation and development and asset management. The key strategy for delivering resident services is a community learning center.

Most learning centers are located directly in a multifamily property. With smaller and scattered-site properties, they may be in the neighborhood or near by. In rural settings, some even may be designed as mobile or distance-based.

Because they offer numerous programs that help residents attain their personal and asset-growth goals, learning centers often become the focal point of a community. Learning center staff assess community needs and design outcome-based programs in response. Services, then, focus on personal asset building, and help create a culture of opportunity for families and individuals in the context of affordable multifamily properties.

The services are designed to be “outcome-based,” such as after-school tutoring and computer access, to improve grades and test scores; individual development account (IDA) services, to increase family savings; homebuyer

preparation, to facilitate home purchases; and leadership training, to develop community leaders and increase neighborhood security.

Foundation Communities' Role

“From the very first,” recalls Frances Ferguson, who founded Foundation Communities in the 1980s (as Central Texas Mutual Housing Association) with an initial goal of developing cooperative housing, “we were committed to working with residents to develop a sense of community.” Based on this commitment, resident councils and initial after-school programs were developed.

Ferguson later was hired by Neighborhood Reinvestment for her multifamily expertise, and now manages its NeighborWorks® Multifamily Initiative. Says Ferguson, “In 1998, the members of the Multifamily Initiative realized that the common ground of all resident programs was learning, and decided the name ‘learning centers’ could serve as an umbrella for the many resident-directed services offered.”

Meantime, Foundation Communities has gained more than 10 years' experience providing successful on-site learning and asset-building programs.

“We've had our share of failures and challenges,” admits Walter Moreau, Foundation Communities' executive director since 1997. “But with the rental market in Austin softer than it's been in 10 years, our high occupancy rates show that it's not just low rents that people need and want – it's also programs that enable them to increase their educational and economic standing.”

Moreau likens learning centers to an empty bowl just waiting to be filled. “We build one and staff it appropriately, and it's amazing how many people show up to get involved,” he says. “None of our centers are exactly alike. What's going on within their walls is a reflection of the surrounding community.” (See sidebar.)

Foundation Communities is one of 13 housing-based learning center nonprofits participating in Neighborhood Reinvestment's Learning Center Consortium, which is



Based on an “Old Schoolhouse” design, the learning center at the Trails at the Park Apartments was the first new center Foundation Communities designed and built.

COURTESY FOUNDATION COMMUNITIES

Sierra Ridge residents Juan Navarrete (left) and Fausto Lira take part in a weekly GED class taught by a community volunteer. COURTESY FOUNDATION COMMUNITIES



working to define and improve the impact of the learning center industry. Together, they own more than 20,000 units of housing and operate between three and 80 learning centers apiece. (See sidebar.)

Key Strategies

From its own experience and the experience of others in the Learning Center Consortium, Foundation Communities has compiled a set of key strategies for delivering successful on-site resident services programs.

They include high-quality property management, reliable and adequate resources, on-site convenience, family asset-building, and collaborating with other service providers.

High-Quality Property Management. A track record of quality property management must be in place to create a successful learning center.

“We tried to offer resident programs at Sierra Ridge,” remembers Ferguson, “shortly after we acquired the property in 1991. But residents were too angry about previous management. We had to back off and wait to build trust.”

Foundation Communities has learned that whether it inherits residents from a poorly managed property or is working with families in a newly built community, quality management comes first. “If residents’ housing needs aren’t being filled,” says Moreau, “they will not trust us to offer quality programs. If there are still problems with crime or their toilet isn’t getting fixed, they’re not going to care if there’s a matched savings program.”

Reliable and Adequate Resources. Quality programming requires a consistent investment of resources.

Julian Huerta, Foundation Communities’ director of resident services, is having growing pains. When he joined Foundation Communities in 1998, his budget was about \$200,000, and the after-school program served a total of 130 kids at four locations.

In 2004, Foundation Communities’ seven learning centers serve more than 400 kids each day. In addition,

‘An Integral Part of Our Family Life’

The learning center and youth programs at Sierra Ridge were an integral part of our family life. The after-school program was a safe social setting for my children, and the activities gave them the opportunity to experience life-enhancing situations.

My son, Louis, enjoyed social and community service activities. My daughter, Laura, participated in community service and teen employment programs. The maturity they gained from participation in the youth programs enhanced their academics and sports activities.

My role as a parent led to my volunteer work on the Foundation Communities board of directors. I also volunteer in our computer lab, attend Spanish-language class, and join in community and social functions.

My time at our learning center is well spent, socializing with my neighbors and contributing to my community.

– Charles DiTullio

Foundation Communities board member,
Sierra Ridge resident,
Father of Louis, 15, and Laura, 22

Foundation Communities offers adult programs like financial literacy classes and individual development accounts (IDAs) – matched savings accounts that Foundation Communities’ residents can use for a down payment for a house, college or technical training, or starting a small business.

“Our current budget is over \$1.2 million,” says Huerta. “Sixty-five percent of that is generated by the properties from rent revenue, but the rest must be raised from government, foundation, and corporate grants.” The budget includes eight full-time and 28 part-time staff who work at the learning centers. In addition, an active and varied asset-building program employs three full-time staff.

“Staffing is the primary expense of resident services programs. You need to have qualified staff who understand residents’ needs and can respond with effective programs. We are committed to paying full-time staff adequately because we want to keep learning center coordinators for many years.” In addition, Foundation Communities welcomes volunteers.

“You get what you pay for,” Moreau says. “We figure it costs \$600 per child to educate a child in our after-school program. It costs another \$300 per adult program

Jesus Saldaña (left) and Tony Bernal do their homework at the Sierra Ridge learning center in South Austin.

COURTESY FOUNDATION COMMUNITIES



participant each year.”

On-Site Convenience. The convenience of on-site facilities is integral to success, by removing barriers such as transportation and childcare. Free on-site childcare is provided during most adult courses. For children, the access to computers, homework help, and recreational opportunities help them overcome disadvantages they might face as the result of their parents’ modest means.

“Parents seeking to further their own education,” explains Huerta, “can come home from work, have dinner, and come to the learning center with their kids. Offering families this kind of convenience is key to helping them succeed.”

Foundation Communities has made a significant capital investment to build new learning centers or convert existing buildings. The newest center will cost \$600,000 to build.

“This is the fourth learning center we’ve built,” says Moreau, “and we’re always trying to improve on the design.” High noise levels and expensive air-conditioning costs during Texas summers have been a challenge. The new two-story, 4,800 square foot building includes several sustainable features that mean the building will generate enough power to cover energy costs and use captured rain water for the surrounding landscaping. The design also includes various noise-dampening features, such as carpet, dropped ceilings in large rooms, and angled walls.

Family Asset-Building. Asset-building programs give families a stake in their future.

In 1997, Foundation Communities became the only organization in Texas offering individual development accounts (IDAs), an asset-building program that provides a \$2 match for every dollar saved. Since then, 100 Foundation Communities residents have used their savings and matching funds to buy a home, pursue educational goals, or start a business.

This year, Foundation Communities was selected as one of 10 organizations nationally to participate in the SEED Initiative (Saving for Education, Entrepreneurship and Downpayment), coordinated by the Corporation for

Enterprise Development, to help low-income children and their families develop saving habits. SEED accounts are long-term savings and investment accounts, established at birth with an initial deposit of \$500 to \$1,000, built with additional deposits over a lifetime, and restricted to financing postsecondary education, starting a small business, buying a home, or financing retirement.

In total, Foundation Communities has administered more than 300 matched savings accounts, and educated 400 people in money management and 150 in preparing for homeownership. “It’s not enough to drop rents,” Moreau explains. “Families with low incomes want a chance to build assets and improve their situation. For us, being able to offer asset-building programs is vital.”

Collaborating with Other Service Providers. Collaboration with other service providers leverages resources.

Many community groups approach Foundation Communities wanting to provide their services at its learning centers. Usually, these requests depend on Foundation Communities’ staff to coordinate or supervise, so Foundation Communities has learned to weigh the potential benefits with the real demands on learning center staff time.

Some partnerships, however, have enabled Foundation Communities to offer a cost-effective program to meet residents’ needs in a way that Foundation Communities alone could not.

“At the Vintage Creek learning center,” says Huerta, “we happened to have a lot of staff turnover all at once, and at the same time we were approached by Heart House, a nonprofit after-school provider that was trying to expand from Dallas into Austin.”

Though the partnership was rocky at first, due to new staffing plus a new location, Heart House has been providing its academically based after-school program at Vintage Creek for two years now.

“This is a win-win for both organizations,” Moreau says.



McGruff the Crime Dog and the city of Austin police bring tips on crime prevention and safety promotion to the annual resident meeting and Halloween dinner at Southwest Trails Apartments.

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“We are not ready to outsource all our youth programs, but we understand that at some of our locations other organizations can provide a better program than we can for less money.” Other major partnerships include office space for a full-time Goodwill job trainer who works exclusively with Foundation Communities residents.

Reflecting another part of the community, six-year old Gabriel Bennett sees the learning center as where “you get to play on computers and do art and sports like kick ball, and Miss Christina pushes you on the swing every day.” ■

Robin Bradford (Robin.Bradford@Foundcom.org) is communications and development director with Foundation Communities in Austin, Texas.



The main classroom at the Sierra Ridge learning center is used for group activities and snacks in the after-school and summer youth programs; for evening money management and homeownership classes; and for neighborhood meetings and bingo nights.

COURTESY FOUNDATION COMMUNITIE

The Learning Center Consortium

The Learning Center Consortium, a membership organization of housing-based learning center nonprofits, has been sponsored since 2002 by Neighborhood Reinvestment’s Multifamily Initiative to support families in pursuit of their American dreams – children succeeding in school, adults increasing their employment options, families saving for and preparing to buy their first home, neighbors working and playing together to enjoy and improve their neighborhoods.

Place-based learning centers that are located within affordable apartment communities provide access to technology, remove the barriers to continuing education, and build pathways to a broad network of resources in the external community. In short, through learning centers, residents in NeighborWorks® rental homes build their own personal and community assets.

Consortium members include both NeighborWorks® organizations and, in order to ensure industry-wide perspective, selected other community-based nonprofit organizations.

NeighborWorks® members are **AHC Inc. of Arlington**, Virginia; **Alamo Area MHA** of San Antonio; **Community HousingWorks** of Escondido, California; **Foundation Communities** of Austin, Texas; **Madison Park Development Corporation** of Boston; **MHA of Hawaii** of Honolulu; **Rocky Mountain MHA** of Denver; **Sacramento MHA** in California; **South County Housing** of Gilroy, California; and **Woonsocket Neighborhood Development Corporation** of Woonsocket, Rhode Island.

Independent members (larger owners, who each operate many centers) are The Community Builders of

Boston, CommonBond of Minneapolis, and Mercy Housing Inc., based in Denver.

Member organizations develop and implement programming at local learning centers. They develop and test systems, share best practices, and integrate evaluation systems within the learning centers.

The consortium is pursuing four long-term functions:

- ▶ *Driving toward excellence in outcomes*, through outcomes-based benchmarking among peers.
- ▶ *Creating efficiency in production*, by working with its members to recognize effective programs that maximize impact on personal assets of families in an affordable housing setting.
- ▶ *Optimizing learning center impact on property performance*, by studying the impact housing-based learning centers have on the overall physical and financial stability of the property and its neighborhood, and by developing best practices in the management of learning centers.
- ▶ *Building sustainable funding sources*, by creating a better connection between learning centers and property operations, and more effectively linking housing-based learning centers to education and technology-center funding.

Neighborhood Reinvestment has played an important role in coordinating and facilitating the consortium, investing grants to support the participation of NeighborWorks® organizations, and providing technical assistance and training to member organizations. Neighborhood Reinvestment also works to identify ongoing grant funding for member organizations. ■

Highlights of Selected Community Learning Centers

Community learning centers serve as platforms from which numerous programs are offered, targeting the attainment of residents' personal and community asset-growth goals. The highlights below profile selected members of the Neighborhood Reinvestment's Learning Center Consortium. (Three additional members – **Alamo Area Mutual Housing Association**, **Foundation Communities**, and **Sacramento Mutual Housing Association** – are profiled elsewhere in this section.)

AHC Inc. **Arlington, Virginia**

AHC Inc. was incorporated in 1975 as the Arlington Housing Corporation. It changed its name to AHC Inc. in 1998. AHC's activities include the acquisition and preservation of multifamily rental properties, construction and rehabilitation of single-family homes, promoting home-ownership opportunities through education and counseling, and lending to low- and moderate-income families for home improvement and/or assistance with home purchases.

In addition, AHC also is involved in delivering community services primarily directed to the needs of children and families residing in AHC properties.

AHC's mission is to sustain and increase the supply of safe, affordable rental and owner-occupied housing for low- and moderate-income individuals; to educate the public about the importance of high-quality affordable housing; and to ensure that AHC properties enhance the neighborhoods in which they are located.

SELECTED PROPERTY PROFILE

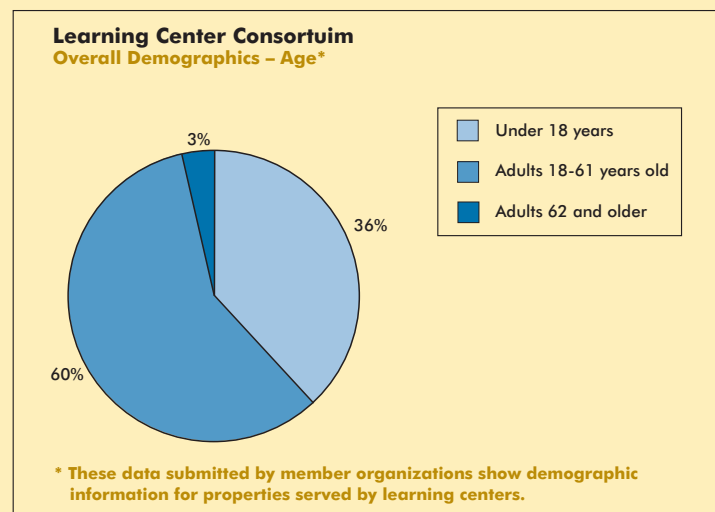
Virginia Gardens, 76 units, and Taylor Square, 44 units, in Arlington, are two adjacent multifamily housing properties owned and managed by AHC Inc. Approximately 90 percent of the units are subsidized.

Community services are offered at Virginia Gardens to serve both properties and the surrounding community. Virginia Gardens houses 4,000 square feet of learning center space, including a 1,000 square foot computer center, 1,000 square feet of space occupied by Greenbrier Learning Center, a 1,000 square-foot community room, and 1,000 square feet of space used by Arlington Public Schools preschool program. The computer center houses 12 Pentium II computers, with high-speed Internet access and a laser and an inkjet printer. Approximately 25 percent of the property residents, along with residents from the surrounding community, attend programs at the learning center.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS

AHC Inc. 2003 data highlights from Virginia Gardens Community Center participants include:

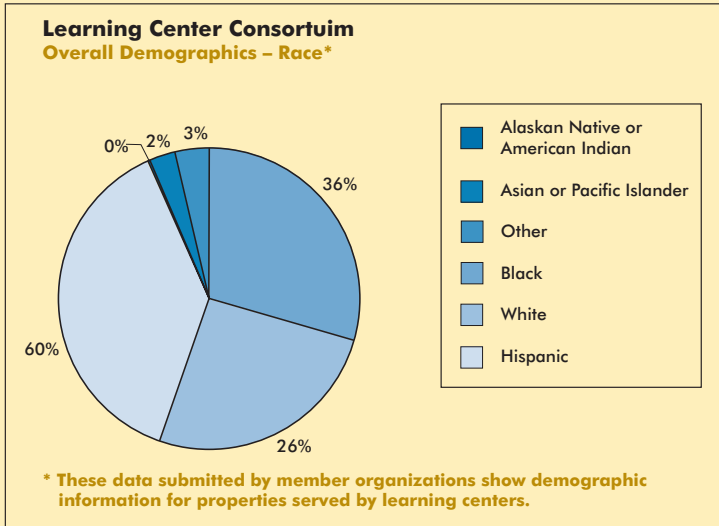
- ▶ 93 percent of children in grades three to five improved in reading or math;
- ▶ 88 percent of preschool program participants improved in reading; and
- ▶ 67 percent of middle and high schoolers maintained or improved their grades.



CommonBond Communities **Minneapolis**

CommonBond Communities (www.commonbond.org) is Minnesota's largest nonprofit provider of affordable housing. CommonBond housing includes 47 communities serving more than 5,000 people living in 3,500 apartments and townhomes of family, senior, and special needs housing. They are located in 30 municipalities throughout Minnesota.

CommonBond has earned a national reputation for excellence in developing and managing quality affordable housing, while



providing customized resident services administered through Advantage Centers that promote resident success.

CommonBond partners with hundreds of individuals and organizations. These collaborations help provide attention-to-detail acquisition and development services and property management services to create affordable rental housing that the neighborhood sees as an asset. These partnerships also offer resources that foster self-reliance and build community; promote economic independence for adults, academic achievement for youth, and bolster independent living and life-long learning for seniors and people with special needs. The CommonBond board of directors and leadership team guide the organization's work. Local independent community boards monitor the needs of the residents and help sustain the quality of the rental communities.

SELECTED PROPERTY PROFILE

Seward Towers West is a 319-unit HUD Section 236 property with project-based Section 8. A 760-square foot learning center contained six computers with high-speed Internet access. A new addition, completed in January, provides 8,500 square feet that will accommodate 10 computers and increased learning opportunities. The original center could not serve the community because it was located in the midst of resident apartment hallways. The new addition provides a private outside entrance for nonresidents.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS

Data highlights from Seward Towers West for 2003 include:

- ▶ 100 percent of adults participating in ESL improved their English test scores;

- ▶ 71 percent of children are reaching their academic goals;
- ▶ 57 percent of children are attending after-school academic programs;
- ▶ 21 percent of residents obtain jobs through the center's employment program.

Mercy Housing Inc.
Denver

Mercy Housing Inc. (www.mercyhousing.org) develops affordable housing for families, seniors, formerly homeless populations, people with HIV/AIDS, and individuals with chronic mental illnesses and physical impairments. With the help of public and private funding, Mercy Housing builds or rehabilitates housing according to community needs. The housing includes multi-unit rental apartments and single-family homes,

single-room occupancy apartments for formerly homeless adults, handicap-accessible units for individuals with physical impairments, and self-help housing programs for families ready for homeownership.

Mercy Housing Inc. partners with residents to promote job creation and advancement, and to provide access to job training, skills development programs, technology advances, and other forms of education. It is a partner of choice among governments, financial institutions, nonprofit organizations, foundations, health care institutions, and religious communities.

SELECTED PROPERTY PROFILES

Folsom Gardens is a 95-unit, HUD-subsidized property with a 400-square foot computer learning center that houses four computers with high-speed Internet access and an HP printer.

Folsom Village is an 81-unit tax credit property, with a 600-square foot computer learning center and 12 computers with high-speed Internet access and a laser printer.

Wishing Well Villas is an 83-unit multifamily property with 16 units of subsidized and 66 units of unsubsidized housing. It has a 1,000-square foot learning center, with five computers with high speed Internet access and two printers.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS

Mercy Housing Inc. data highlights for 2003 include:

- ▶ 100 percent of children 6 to 12 maintain or improve grades (at Wishing Well Villas);
- ▶ 38 percent of residents are enrolled in a health insurance plan;

- ▶ 74 residents participated in the Learning Center Advisory Council;
- ▶ 50 percent of children attend an extracurricular after-school program.

**Mutual Housing Association of Hawaii
Honolulu**

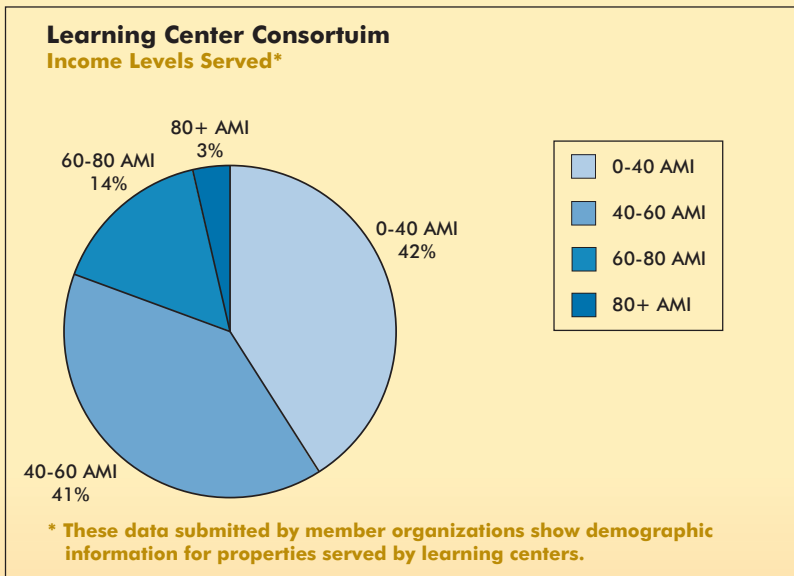
Mutual Housing Association of Hawaii, a NeighborWorks® organization, was founded in 1992 for the purpose of stabilizing communities through resident participation in the development, ownership, and management of high quality, affordable housing. Its mission is “to develop, own and manage multi-housing communities through affordable housing, economic development, and supportive services so that residents can build assets, earn income and improve the quality of family life and the economic vitality of the surrounding community.” MHAH currently owns and operates more than 500 units of affordable housing and has three learning centers in its property portfolio.

SELECTED PROPERTY PROFILE

Lihue Court Townhomes is a 173-unit subsidized housing property, located in Lihue, houses more than 2,300 square feet of learning center program space, including 12 computers with Internet access and four laser printers. The Lihue Court Townhomes learning center serves approximately 20 percent of the property.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS

MHAH data highlights for 2003 from Lihue Court



Townhomes include:

- ▶ 100 percent of children who improve one grade level in reading or math;
- ▶ 77 percent of children met their academic goals;
- ▶ 38 percent of high school seniors graduated from high school; and
- ▶ 86 percent of children attend an extracurricular after-school program.

**Rocky Mountain Mutual Housing Association
Denver**

Rocky Mountain Mutual Housing Association (RMMHA) was founded in 1992 with the belief that people who do not own their homes could enjoy safe, affordable, and quality housing and have a significant voice in the management and operation of their housing communities.

The principle mission of RMMHA is to be a partnership organization of local community and resident members that develops, owns, and manages permanent affordable housing and provides related services for low- and moderate-income residents. The residents are members of and have a voice in the affairs of the mutual housing association.

Rocky Mountain Mutual Housing Association partners with public and nonprofit agencies to address three target areas: youth programs, education, and economic asset building. Services include after-school and summer youth programs, English language acquisition classes, economic literacy classes, and employment assistance through the Mayor’s Office of Workforce Development.

RMMHA operates community technology centers (CTC) within each learning center. All technology center computers have Pentium IV processors, DVD drives, and high-speed Internet access. All technology centers teach the following classes: Window XP, Word 2002, Excel 2002, Publisher 2002, Access 2002, Front Page, and Internet use. In addition, each CTC offers a youth computer club.

SELECTED PROPERTY PROFILE

The Joint Activity Center serves two properties, Heritage Estates and Garden Court, which contain 626 units of multi-family housing, 40 of which are subsidized with Section 8 certificates. The 9,800 square foot Joint Activity Center contains a weight room, full-size gym, meeting space and satellite offices for collaborative part-

nership staff, including the Colorado I Have a Dream Foundation and Girls Incorporated of Metro Denver. The CTC contains 11 computers. Approximately 77 percent are between 40 percent and 60 percent of area median income (AMI) and 22 percent are between 60 percent and 80 percent of AMI. An additional 1 percent is above 80 percent of AMI.

The Townview Plaza Learning Center serves Townview Plaza and Townview Annex. The properties have 149 units of multifamily housing, with six Section 8 certificates. The CTC contains six computers. At Townview, approximately 60 percent of households have incomes between 0 percent and 40 percent of AMI, and 40 percent have incomes between 40 percent and 50 percent of AMI.

Mountain Terrace Learning Center in Westminster, Colorado, serves Mountain Terrace, a 152-unit multifamily property. Seven of the units have Section 8 certificates. The CTC contains 10 computers. Resident-interest surveys are being collected to determine the direction of programming. At Mountain Terrace, 79 percent of households have incomes between 40 percent and 60 percent of AMI, and 21 percent have incomes between 60 percent and 80 percent.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS

Rocky Mountain Mutual Housing 2003 data highlights from the Joint Activity Center include:

- ▶ 89 youth engaged in structured after-school and summer programs;
- ▶ 43 adults completed computer classes;
- ▶ 23 adults are enrolled full-time in college or trade school;
- ▶ 47 youth used computers to do homework; and
- ▶ 13 families moved into homeownership.

The Community Builders

Boston

Founded in 1964, Community Builders (www.tcbinc.org) is the largest nonprofit urban housing developer in the country. Community Builders has completed more than 17,000 units of affordable and mixed-income housing, and manages more than 6,500 units. One of the most active developers in the HUD HOPE VI program, Community Builders is engaged in 15 large-scale, mixed-income public and assisted housing redevelopment projects.

At 20 developments with substantial community initiatives (CI) programming, site staff implement a housing-based service strategy centered on employment. CI staff have adapted the Project Match methodology. On-site resident services coordinators and case managers reach

out to residents, engaging them where they live, on their terms, around things that matter to them most – decent, affordable housing, a safe and supportive environment, a path to a new or better job. The process begins by providing affordable, well-managed, supportive housing environments. Around the housing, a network of programs and services is built in seven program areas: resident services, housing services, workforce and employment development, asset building, youth development, community building, and senior services.

Through the end of 2002, CI staff had helped place more than 1,200 residents in jobs, assisted 2,800 EITC claims, completed nearly 8,500 successful service provider referrals, enrolled 600 children in positive youth development programs, registered more than 300 children for health insurance through CHIP, and prevented more than 380 evictions through timely engagement of families in crisis.

SELECTED PROPERTY PROFILE

Plumley Village East is a 430-unit, subsidized, multifamily housing property in Worcester, Massachusetts. Plumley Village CI department provides programs and services in the seven program areas listed above. All programs utilize a learning center with more than 3,000 square feet of space, containing 19 Pentium computers, with high-speed Internet access, and eight printers.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS

Data highlights from Plumley Village East for 2003 include:

- ▶ 68 percent of adults participating in a job training program got a job;
- ▶ 48 percent of children maintain or improve grades;
- ▶ 40 percent of the population served by the learning center at the property;
- ▶ 21 children use the computers at the learning center to do homework. ■

Learning Center Success Measures

Learning Center Consortium members, in order to build the information infrastructure needed to achieve their long-term goals, have worked collaboratively to identify a common language for outcome areas and for building a set of shared measures with specific definitions.

Each member organization agreed to submit data on a list of five to nine measures. These measures, in turn, were categorized into three main areas – personal assets, community assets and center sustainability.

A “measures dictionary” outlined specific definitions for how every measure is calculated, to assure consistency in measurement among member organizations.

Leading indicators are measures that illustrate the initial success of a specific program. For example, what is the target population that would take advantage of a particular program, and, of that population, how many actually enrolled and attended the program?

Ultimate outcome measures are those that illustrate the ultimate success of a program or group of programs on the residents or the property. For example, is an after-school tutoring program resulting in children maintaining or improving their grades? Is a job training program resulting in residents obtaining and keeping jobs?

Once leading and lagging measures were identified, consortium members worked to develop a standardized reporting format, which would document ultimate outcome data, and also document the success of the programs that lead to those

ultimate outcomes.

A reporting spreadsheet, developed from forms already used by members, was created that illustrates both leading and lagging measures. While a leading measure might indicate that a program is well liked and well attended, if a lagging measure does not show the desired result, then staff can use this information to make necessary program modifications.

A property profile form provides a way for member organizations to submit information about the property, demographics and the learning center budget and to measure that information on a selected property. For the consortium, this property profile data is a source that can be used to begin identifying benchmarks and best practices for the entire learning center industry. The profile information will also help the consortium to understand the relationship between the center facilities themselves and programmatic success.

Another challenge was developing a standardized budget form for the annual budget reporting process. The goal of reporting budget data is to establish standards and benchmarks for learning center costs, as well as to help the consortium as a whole understand each organization’s funding needs. Without a standardized budget form, each group provided income and expenses in a variety of different ways, making it difficult to compare between organizations, or develop a range of costs for items such as staff and programs. A standardized form has been tested and will be put into practice in the 2004 reporting cycle. ■

Learning Center Snapshot

While details vary among the centers in Neighborhood Reinvestment's Learning Center Consortium, some elements are common throughout.

The facilities range from 400 to almost 10,000 square feet. The number of computers ranges from four to 19, but all provide Internet access. Each center is typically open at least five days a week, and often seven. Programs are offered throughout the day and often in the evening as well.

Most centers have a dedicated on-site staff person responsible for the learning center. In addition, a supervisory resident services coordinator oversees the on-site staff and assures consistency in resident programming. These positions are typically paid for out of the organization's main office or core budget, though occasionally the supervisory position is prorated among the

property budgets the resident services coordinator is responsible for overseeing.

All organizations in the consortium use partners to help leverage the resources of the property and the organization. Examples of programs and services delivered by partnerships include after-school programs, job training programs, computer literacy programs, and English as Second Language programs.

Annual learning center budgets at a single property can range from \$42,000 to more than \$300,000. The per-unit cost ranges from \$261 to \$816. A long-term goal of the consortium is to work toward integrating specific portions of learning center expenses into the operating budget of the property, and to have these costs recognized as allowable expenses by various federal housing programs. ■

The general public can participate in programs at the learning center at Alamo Area MHA's Babcock North Fourplexes II in San Antonio. This was the complex's grand opening.

PHOTOS BY SHELLEY NAYLOR



Alamo Area MHA

Using Learning Centers in Community Building

BY JENNIFER GONZALEZ

When the Alamo Area Mutual Housing Association (AAMHA) tried to engage local San Antonio politicians in our efforts to improve our community, we encountered an unexpected stumbling block. We realized that elected officials were not taking our residents' concerns seriously. Instead, they were focusing their attention on area homeowners.

They didn't view renters as constituents. They didn't campaign around our properties, and they were not aware what services were important to us. Their view was often "my constituents don't want you here," but what they failed to realize is that our residents are their constituents too.

Since the community learning centers at each of our eight properties feature activities that focus on resident leadership and community organizing, we helped the residents take action. There are 150 households that are part of this community, and they decided to send a clear message to politicians: "I am your constituent. I live in this district. There are issues that are important to me. And I vote."

We organized our residents to attend meetings that politicians attended. If there was a meeting, we had people there. Having a presence, made it more difficult for politicians to refer to our residents as "those people." Over time, our participation helped break down walls and perceptions of affordable housing, and other people in the community started to speak on our behalf. Politicians started paying attention to our concerns.

Registering Voters

Inspired by the success of that effort, Kathy Knott, chair of the property and resident issues advisory committee (PRIAC), began focusing the committee's efforts on voter registration. As a result, the entire resident services staff, along with one board member, has been "deputized," registering people to vote – not only on AAMHA properties, but also throughout the community. Strong relationships with resident associations bolstered our efforts.

This spring, we held a registration party for the entire community. Even children were registered, and they will get to vote in a mock election. Getting the kids involved is important, because if we can get them talking about the importance of voting, they will take that message home to their parents. Some of our local politicians attended the party as well, which would have been unheard of just a few short years ago.

Building Communities

People choose our communities not as a last resort, but because this is a good place to live. By building and maintaining strong communities, we keep residents over the long term. If people decide to buy a house later, they often buy in the community, remaining committed to issues that are important to them.

Our programs and our commitment to working with surrounding neighborhoods have led to a grant from the Ford Foundation. The grant is to help organizations use technology centers to bring together people in the community, and the support of local and state elected officials will be crucial to the success of the program. We are a participating member of the Neighborhood Reinvestment Learning Center Consortium.

We bring in people from different ethnic and economic backgrounds – homeowners, renters, business owners, and others. They come for the technology center, and from there, they build relationships and start to talk about what they can do together to develop long-term community assets.

Thanks to our efforts with elected officials, we know they will be on board to help us accomplish our goals, build a stronger, more stable community, and support the growth of tomorrow's leaders. ■

Jennifer Gonzalez (jgonzalez@alamomha.com) is deputy director of Alamo Area Mutual Housing Association.

Also contributing to this article was Susan Naimark (snaimark@nw.org), a management consultant with Neighborhood Reinvestment's Resident Leadership Initiative.

Sheryl Hernandez (top to bottom), Mary Torres, and Ronald Steele (assisted by resident coordinator Tina Ramirez) work on their voter registration cards at Babcock North Fourplexes.



PHOTOS BY JENNIFER GONZALEZ



Resident Leadership Training

Many NeighborWorks® organizations use their community learning centers in providing formal leadership training to tenants in the multifamily properties they own.

Alamo Area MHA of San Antonio, **Community HousingWorks** of San Diego, and **Sacramento MHA**, for example, have each created their own resident leadership development curriculums that are offered regularly to tenants in their properties.

Alamo Area MHA has learned from four-plus years of experience that offering training annually and spreading it out over four training sessions in six months provides the best balance for getting people to participate in in-depth training without overwhelming their schedules. It has also developed “graduate” level training to respond to the high level of interest expressed by residents who completed the basic course. Many graduates now serve in board and committee roles in the organization.

Community HousingWorks’ Leadership Academy offers 31 training modules, available in English and Spanish, on topics including: communication skills, asset mapping, fundraising, conflict resolution, board and committee roles, fair housing, group dynamics, effective meetings, event organizing, and more.

Sacramento MHA supplements its Leadership Development Institute with targeted leadership training for youth and for the large Slavic immigrant community living in its properties. They also leverage this training to support the volunteer work requirement in their properties. As a result, their community organizing staff has been able to decrease time spent on property management issues, problem solving and activity organizing, and 26 of the 43 resident programs and activities offered in 2003 were either initiated or led by residents, including a Cyber Café run by youth and resident-led recruitment for the organization’s financial education classes.

Other multifamily owners use an array of strategies to support leadership development, including sending tenants to Neighborhood Reinvestment’s Community Leadership Institutes and local community leadership programs.

The NeighborWorks® Resident Leadership Initiative will explore these and other resident leadership issues in a forthcoming issue of *bright ideas*. ■

Sacramento MHA

Exciting Energy at a Center Shared by Two Communities

BY AMY GOLDWITZ

I am fortunate enough – as coordinator of the Valley Initiative for Developing Assets (VIDA) – to have my office at Victory Townhomes, a development of Sacramento Mutual Housing Association.

Victory Townhomes includes 21 beautiful three- and four-bedroom townhomes powered with solar energy, an internal common grassy quad and playgrounds, and a 5,500-square-foot community center that includes three offices, a state-of-the-art computer lab with 20 Dell PCs, and a generous community meeting room space.

Residents at Victory Townhomes share this community space with their neighbors at Evergreen Estates, a 57-unit SMHA family community located across the street. Resident households are all very low-income, below 40 and 50 percent of the area median adjusted for household size. The site is a participating member of the Neighborhood Reinvestment Learning Center Consortium.

I use the space at Victory Townhomes for workshops and meetings relating to my own project, which is SMHA's financial education and individual development account (IDA) program and a collaborative effort of several local nonprofit organizations staffed by SMHA, and also to observe the exciting energy of the various other programs and activities happening here each day.

Rebuilding a Community

But I'm getting ahead of the story. Looking at Victory Townhomes today, it's hard to believe that it inhabits the same location as the former Lexington Apartments, which once inspired the following description in *The Sacramento Bee*:



Victory Townhomes

COURTESY SACRAMENTO MHA

► “In the building’s dark recesses, drug deals and gang activity transpired. Sacramento officials brought action against a string of owners for code violations, and ultimately closed the building.

► Then squatters moved into the cramped units, lacking electricity and water. Pipes broke and were not repaired. Rats scuttled back and forth across the floors.”

In 1999, Sacramento Mutual Housing Association and the Sacramento Valley Organizing Community (SVOC), an Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate, launched an effort to reclaim the Lexington Apartments site as a positive community hub through demo-

lition of the old apartments and building a new community. Victory Townhomes opened in February 2003.

Programs at the Center

In SMHA's mutual housing communities, resident leadership development is the foundation upon which all other programs are developed. A team of multilingual and multicultural professional community organizers and organizing interns employed by SMHA identify residents with leadership potential, provide leadership training, and put their newly gained skills into practice.

Residents identify programs and resources that will help address community concerns, and residents select any outside service providers and participate in ongoing evaluations of programs. Top leaders are providing with advanced training that equips them to work with neighborhood associations, elected officials, and broad-based organizing groups to change policies and alter resource-allocation patterns that affect their communities.

SMHA community organizer Neeru Bahadur helps residents develop the necessary leadership skills to take ownership of all programs and activities in the center.

For example, Molly Chiah, a resident at Evergreen Estates and part-time organizer-in-training employed by SMHA, has recruited several youth leaders to help her plan and implement a range of programs for children and teens in the neighborhood. These include craft sessions, a homework club, and two different computer classes.

Youth volunteer Tiffany Beaver leads CyberYouth, geared toward helping young residents use the Internet for academic research. Daniel Watts, working under a contract with the Sacramento County Office of Education, leads a weekly class teaching youth the computer skills that help both with their homework and with future professional development. Once a week, a Girl Scout troop meets in the community center.

For adults, Tom Amos of Academic Career Enhancement (ACE) teaches computer skills that can qualify residents for eligibility and/or advancement in the employment arena. Twice a week, SVOC leads an English and Leadership Civics class for Spanish-speaking residents. The course focuses on improving English skills, while also helping participants learn how to engage with and improve their neighborhood.

Our VIDA program offers financial education workshops in the community center in four languages – English, Spanish, Russian and Hmong. Residents who graduate from the program are eligible to enroll in VIDA's individual development account program, in which their monthly savings are matched by private and public donations to help participants purchase homes, start a micro business, or pursue postsecondary education.

VIDA also is piloting a youth financial education and IDA program to help youth learn good budgeting and credit practices, and to assist them in purchasing computers or saving for college. This year, VIDA also launched a partnership with the local IRS office to provide tax preparation

services to increase claims under the earned income tax credit program.

The U.S. Treasury this year honored SMHA and its collaborative VIDA program for standing out nationwide in meeting all the criteria for an effective and progressive financial education program.

Funding the Center

Funding for the community center came from the same sources used in financing the townhomes: a US Bank tax credit investment and a US Bank mortgage and bridge loan; an FHLB affordable housing subsidy through River City Bank; a deferred loan from the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, through a housing trust fund with revenue from a commercial development linkage fee; and a Neighborhood Reinvestment grant.

Operating support is derived, in large part, from several corporate and public grant sources, and, in a small – but important – part, from rental income. SMHA has created a new resource developer position to increase support from foundations and corporations to ensure that programs in all mutual housing communities are able to continue serving the very low-income residents. More information on funders of each program is available on SMHA's Web site, www.mutualhousing.com.

Conclusion

Each day when I come to work, I marvel at how much already has happened here in just over a year. It took a great community effort to make Victory Townhomes a reality, and, now that it's here, it provides a healthy space for local residents to begin envisioning next steps – for themselves, their families, and their community.

Stay tuned. ■

Amy Goldwitz (amyg@mutualhousing.com) is coordinator, Valley Initiative for Developing Assets, an initiative of Sacramento MHA.



Community center classes in English and leadership civics (left) and computers.



PHOTOS BY AMY GOLDWITZ