

What organization hasn't had its share of "revolving door" employees – staff who stay only a short time before they leave for various reasons? Whatever the reasons, staff turnover is costly, and particularly so in the complex world of housing, where new hires require extensive training before they are ready to provide quality services.

At the **Troy Rehabilitation and Improvement Program (TRIP)**, a NeighborWorks® organization in upstate, Troy, New York, we have found a great way to close the revolving door and open the job door to new, committed staff whom we fully expect to remain here for some time. Our answer: Hire our customers.

TRIP's three latest hires, in fact, epitomize the criterion that we've found to be most important in recruitment: commitment to providing affordable housing opportunities. In each case, the employee's commitment results from their personal experiences in accessing affordable housing, whether homeownership or rental.

Meet TRIP staffers Cindy Candelario, Elsie Pastor, and Stephanie Lane, who all understand the enormous impact that buying or renting a high-quality home at an affordable cost can have on a family:

Cindy Candelario



Cindy Candelario is now a housing counselor at TRIP's NeighborWorks Home-Ownership Center®. She is still surprised – and thrilled – that when the center's director, Bobbi Carter, called her in last summer, it wasn't because she was in trouble as a new homeowner.

Instead, Carter asked Candelario to apply for the position of housing counselor. Never mind that Candelario once worked for a law firm in New York City evicting

tenants. It was her experience first as a TRIP tenant and then as a homebuyer, who struggled to clear up credit issues in order to purchase her first home, that provided her with all the credentials she needed.

Candelario took advantage of many of TRIP's housing programs (rental, individual savings accounts, homebuyer education, grant assistance, rehab/resale, home maintenance training, and landlord training), which allows her to promote them enthusiastically and sincerely.

Most importantly, Candelario's successful path to homeownership has led to her growing confidence in herself and to her new career as a housing counselor. As a counselor, she is able to be cheerleader, mentor, sympathizer and role model as potential homebuyers navigate through the difficulties of repairing credit, creating savings, and entering the labyrinth of the homebuying process.

The work is "truly rewarding," Candelario says, "as I help others achieve the amazing success that TRIP helped me to accomplish."

Elsie Pastor



Elsie Pastor was an accountant for 24 years, first in her native Puerto Rico and more recently in Troy, where she moved seven years ago.

In transferring her Section 8 subsidy, Pastor was led to TRIP, which owns and/or manages more than 200 quality apartments locally. She's been a tenant of ours ever since, as has one of her daughters, who since has rented her own apartment from TRIP where she lives with her two young sons around the corner from her mom.

When Pastor resigned her position as staff accountant at the local community action agency, TRIP's rental manager immediately suggested she apply for a job at TRIP. Since July 2004, she has proudly filled



LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

TRIP

Troy, New York

Turning Satisfied Customers into Committed Staff

BY HILARY LAMISHAW

TRIP's new position of rental coordinator.

"This has been a win-win for TRIP," says Theresa Newton, TRIP's director of rental management.

Pastor agrees: "As a tenant working for my landlord, I can provide lots of suggestions about how to improve things, or what concerns we have in the neighborhood."

Furthermore, since Pastor's native language is Spanish, she can communicate easily with our growing base of Hispanic tenants. Without effort, she also has increased our marketing to the area's Hispanics. We've had an increase in Spanish-speaking tenant applicants, which Pastor attributes to people feeling more comfortable since she (literally) speaks their language.

The downside of working for the landlord? Says Pastor, "I recently had to send an eviction notice to my daughter. But fortunately, she's working things out."

Stephanie Lane



One year ago, Stephanie Lane was invited to apply as TRIP's HomeOwnership Center's grants coordinator. This is her second dream come true: She has wanted to work in the housing field ever since she realized her first dream of purchasing a home for her and her family six years ago.

At the time, Lane went through homebuyer education at a local organization where TRIP's Bobbi Carter serves on the board. Again, Carter saw the spark and passion that the program generated in Lane, and Lane's interest in making her experience and knowledge useful to others.

"I may have become discouraged in my pursuit of homeownership," Lane says now, "if it were not for the support and guidance of my housing counselor. I can truly relate to our clients and how overwhelming the

homebuying process can become. I am thrilled to be able to answer their questions and encourage them to pursue their dream. I know the end result is well worth the effort."

We're delighted about having satisfied customers become committed staff. All the skills training in the world can't create the passion needed for this kind of work – but experiencing it yourself does just that! ■

Hilary Lamishaw (Hilary@triponline.org) is director of community affairs for TRIP.

Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts

Adding Diplomacy to the Housing Toolbox

BY ISAAC D. RUSSELL

Many resort communities find that land prices have gone so high that people who work there can't afford to live there. That may be acceptable if there are roads leading elsewhere, but the problem is thornier if the resort is an island off the coast of Massachusetts, in this case, Martha's Vineyard.

Martha's Vineyard consists of six towns with winter and summer populations of 15,000 and 105,000, respectively. The cornerstone of the island's economy is providing services

to seasonal residents and visitors. Since 1998, the average sales price of a home on the Vineyard more than doubled, from \$281,000 to \$731,000 in 2003.

As with other seasonal tourist areas, the Vineyard's permanent residents must compete with vacation renters and second-home buyers. Many island tenants do not have stable year-round housing. Instead, they are forced into the "island shuffle," vacating their winter homes between May and September, so their



Isaac D. Russell

PHOTO BY A.R. PRIOR



landlords can rent them at higher summer rates. Second-home buyers can outbid year-round residents wanting to purchase homes.

Since 1997, I've been a permanent island resident. I'm a retired lawyer and former Foreign Service Officer. Maybe I can do something, I thought, to help solve the affordable housing problem on Martha's Vineyard. In my Hartford law practice, I represented neighborhood and church groups that were developing subsidized multifamily housing. I must have some skills that would help here.

It turns out that the large-scale federally assisted projects that worked in Hartford don't work here. Even the words don't work. Let's drop out "subsidized," and "multifamily," and even "affordable." We'd better call it "appropriate housing for working Vineyard families." That's better.

I retired after 29 years with the law firm to join the State Department as a Foreign Service Officer, working overseas for the United States Information Agency. My wife and I spent a year in Washington learning the trade. I served first in Zimbabwe in 1990, then as Information Officer in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, and as Cultural Exchange Officer in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

None of my Foreign Service cultural sensitivity helps very much on Martha' Vineyard, I've found, though the challenges are similarly tribal. Each town has its own program for handing out town-owned land as home sites to town residents meeting certain income guidelines. No town other than Edgartown is planning to build anything. Each town is its own master and knows its own mind. There is plenty of good will here but not much building, except at the high end.

We left the Foreign Service in 1996 and went to teach law at a newly formed law school in Eldoret, Kenya. That's on the edge of the Rift Valley,

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where many of the world-class, long-distance runners train. Since I didn't know British or Kenyan law, I taught Alternate Dispute Resolution (Arbitration, Mediation, and Negotiation).

Diplomacy's Value

These skills do turn out to be valuable here. In dealing with neighbors and town officials, and in seeking required approvals from island-wide and local town boards and commissions, we need all the skills our five-person, Bridge Housing Corp. board of directors can muster. Some of the island boards and commissions look suspiciously at outsiders proposing to change the existing order – even if they agree, in concept, that affordable housing is much needed.

Our tax-exempt nonprofit, Bridge Housing Corp., plans to build 15 two-family houses (condominiums) on the southern eight acres of a 24-acre parcel we have under option in the town of Tisbury. The remaining 16 acres will be sold to the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank, an island-wide conservation agency. Bridge Housing was formed by the Housing Ecumenical Action Team, an association of six island congregations supporting affordable housing on the Vineyard.

Every regulatory approval we've received (first, from the Martha's Vineyard Commission, a regional planning authority, and, more recently, the Tisbury Zoning Board of Appeals) has been immediately appealed to the courts by angry or worried abutters. We can usually get

the appeals dismissed, but it takes time and money that would be better spent on building and improving the housing.

Our diplomatic skills do not seem to work with the neighbors. The two retired builders on our board advised us strongly not to go talk to the neighbors first, before anything happens on the site. They said that neighbors will always object, and you just have to live with it. If you call them together to explain the project and hear what they have to say, you simply would have helped organize a neighborhood association against you where none existed before.

Why is it all so difficult? Possibly because the social consensus has not yet embraced the need for higher-density land use than the six towns have become accustomed to. Perhaps they fear an influx of low-income families from off island.

They need not worry. The people we are building homes for already live on the island. As many as 70 percent of the homes will be allocated to Tisbury residents, and the rest to the other five towns. Neighbors will not have to live next to some off-island "other."

The Bridge Housing board of directors has developed the long view. We assume we simply will outlast the opponents. The town of Tisbury is on our side, and its weight and general opinion will eventually tip the scales in favor of our building these houses.

We don't need diplomacy, but we do need allies. ■

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