

THE HOPE VI PROJECT – UTICA, NY

YEAR 4 PROGRAM EVALUATION

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THE HOPE VI PROJECT IN UTICA, NY: YEAR FOUR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Utica Municipal Housing Authority (UMHA) received 11.5 million dollars in funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2003 for the Hope VI Program. In this fourth year of project operation, the program evaluation was designed to assess the impact of the project through the attitudes and opinions of seven focus groups comprised of Cornhill residents and one key leaders focus group.

Nationally, the HOPE VI Program has recorded successes in achieving the goals of community revitalization. The goals of the program are broad; they include not only demolishing and replacing distressed public housing but revitalizing communities and reducing economic and racial/ethnic segregation. Many neighborhoods have made substantial improvements in safety, employment, education, property values and other neighborhood level indicators.

The population of Cornhill is diverse and includes recent refugees and immigrants, in addition to African-American and Latino residents who have been a part of the city for years. Income levels and educational achievement are low; unemployment rates are high for males and especially high for black males.

Eight focus groups were conducted in Cornhill with 2-8 participants per group. Seven groups were comprised of residents, and one group was conducted with invited members of the HOPE VI Task Force. Student researcher teams of two from Hamilton College conducted the groups after working with targeted agencies to invite the participants. Participants completed brief surveys prior to the group interview and received a \$10 stipend for their time. The key leaders group was an exception and was conducted by the program evaluator of record, Dr. Judith Owens-Manley with a student research assistant. Individual reports were prepared for each hosting agency, and then results were compiled and edited into this community report. Major themes were drawn from the transcripts and are reported here.

Twenty-seven residents and eight key leaders participated in the focus groups. More than half of the resident participants were Black (55.5%), and 18.5 percent each identified themselves as White, non-Hispanic or White, Hispanic. Most were of an age for prime working years, ages 30-64 (74%), and it was a more educated group than would be representative of the neighborhood.

Residents are satisfied with the neighborhood they live in but less satisfied with entertainment and recreational facilities and service programs. Initial high hopes with the project dissipated or waned over time as the project dragged on. Major themes highlighted in the interviews concerned community revitalization; meeting the needs of the community for capacity-building and building social capital; a community that is safe and aesthetically pleasing; and resident engagement in the planning process.

Residents expressed disappointment that services to build people were not emphasized, stating that building houses was insufficient for what was needed. The failure to build a Community School as a part of the Project was another disappointment but was not attributed solely to UMHA. Blame was also placed with partnering organizations in the community that failed to follow through on their initial promises. The lack of job creation and failure to move the futures of residents to a new economic level was a third area of disappointment.

Some participants agreed that HOPE VI homes have made a perceptible difference in the tone of the neighborhood and in some cases have even inspired neighbors to take better care of their properties. Others however believed the improvements to be insufficient, cited structural problems with the homes or the fact that homes were vacant as critiques of the program. They also voiced displeasure with the neighborhood infrastructure and condition of their surroundings, such as roads, lighting, and sidewalks that the City of Utica would be responsible for.

Communication about HOPE VI was criticized as misleading and insufficient, and some participants presented a general distrust toward the government and leadership, which were used as interchangeable terms. There was a perceived disconnect between the neighborhood residents and the HOPE VI Project staff in the planning and decision-making process.

Residents of the HOPE VI target area had mixed responses about the safety of their neighborhood. Some cited Cornhill as a very desirable place to live, and others believed that no one would enter the housing market in Cornhill due to safety issues. Respondents spoke of how highly they valued recreational activities for the children and cited a lack of opportunities for them.

Despite good intentions, indicators of community dissatisfaction with the project remain strong. HOPE VI has fallen short of the original hopes and expectations, and the community remains very distressed economically. Residents are frustrated that they have not felt a personal or community impact or benefit from a multi-million dollar project. The home ownership program is assessed as lacking for the people originally from the neighborhood to better their lot, and that was true of the hopes for job creation as well.

It is recommended that UMHA administrators continue to meet with key Cornhill community members to create alignment on goals, capacities and limitations. If at all possible, a community center should be constructed with the cooperation of all key partners in the project, since it is beyond the scope of HOPE VI to do so. HOPE VI administrators may consider forming a partnership with lending institutions and making it generally easier for people to understand and move through the home ownership process. Residents want improvements made to the infrastructure around the neighborhood, better recreational facilities, and some want an improved police presence. For future projects, the groups noted the need to have strong, committed leadership and a solid plan with goals developed for and by the community. And finally, the HOPE VI Project should remain focused on building homes and revitalizing Cornhill, rather than diluting the positive effects of home-building and neighborhood revitalization by spreading into other parts of Utica. In its remaining months, HOPE VI should direct its funds and political power to make sure that these things are addressed.

Introduction

The Hope VI program is a competitive grant program, federally administered through local public housing authorities (PHA.) The Utica Municipal Housing Authority (UMHA) received funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Development (HUD) in 2003 to demolish Washington Courts, which had been determined to be a distressed public housing site, and to build scattered-site housing in Cornhill, an inner-city neighborhood in the City of Utica. In this fourth year of project operation, the program evaluator at Hamilton College proposed to assess the impact of the project through the attitudes and opinions of seven focus groups with 8-12 Cornhill residents each. In addition, one key leaders group was invited to discuss the members' perspectives on the progress of the HOPE VI Project in Utica. Results of the focus groups are presented here with recommendations for the balance of the project.

Background

A model HOPE VI program was created in 1993 and later was authorized in accordance with The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act in 1998. The goals for the HOPE VI program are: "(1) (to encourage) bold visions of neighborhood revitalization; (2) bring back mayors in to public housing decision-making; and (3) (introduce) private sector resources into distressed neighborhoods."¹ Typically, HOPE VI selects a neighborhood that is in need of housing revitalization and a distressed housing project within that neighborhood. The residents are relocated,

¹ Clancy, P.E, Quigley, L (2001). "HOPE VI: A vital tool for comprehensive neighborhood revitalization." pp. 536

the housing project is torn down, a new one is built, and the residents are given the option to move back in. Along the way HOPE VI also attempts to provide the community with various services to help improve the well being of the residents and revitalize the community itself.

HOPE VI has appeared in many of America's largest and most important cities such as Chicago, Boston, and Atlanta to address the problems with their public housing. Even though public housing is a relatively small feature of a city, it is vitally important as "not only have public housing developments historically been located in economically struggling areas, but they have also contributed to the distress of those communities."² With this in mind there was optimism that HOPE VI could, through improvements to housing projects, simultaneously improve their communities.

Nationally, the HOPE VI program has recorded success in achieving the goals of community revitalization. For instance, the notoriety that characterized Chicago's Cabrini-Green discouraged investment or any other development in the neighborhood, but "today, Cabrini-is a largely mixed-income community of well-maintained townhouses located next to a new shopping center with a Starbucks café."³ Many HOPE VI neighborhoods made substantial improvements, including reductions in crime rates, low income households, and households on public assistance.⁴ These favorable decreases have been accompanied

² Zielenbach, Sean The Economic Impact of HOPE VI on Neighborhoods. *The Housing Research Foundation*. 11

³ Harvard Law Review Association. (2003). "When hope falls short: Hope VI, accountability, and the privatization of public housing." pp. 147

⁴ Zielenbach, Sean The Economic Impact of HOPE VI on Neighborhoods. *The Housing Research Foundation*. 7

by increases in employment, per capita income, education levels, property values, and investment in the community.⁵ Other perspectives on HOPE VI, however, are that it is not as positive: “Ten years after HOPE VI’s inception its promise for enhanced choice for public housing residents remains largely unfulfilled.”⁶ Overall, there is some doubt of the effectiveness of the program.

In 2003, the Utica Municipal Housing Authority (UMHA) was one of only 28 housing authorities nationwide and the only authority in New York State to receive a HOPE VI grant totaling \$11,501, 039. The UMHA sought to replace 111 distressed units in Washington Courts with 194 affordable housing units in Cornhill over a four year period. The HOPE VI grant awarded to the city of Utica in 2003 was met with a level of skepticism by the public, in part due to the unique way in which the HOPE VI model would be applied. Instead of demolishing and rebuilding on the same site, the decision was made to demolish the Washington Courts housing project and rebuild in Cornhill, ideally improving the lives of Washington Courts residents and revitalizing the Cornhill community. HOPE VI’s four main goals for Utica were to enhance education and job training opportunities, develop new and rental housing, facilitate improvements in existing houses and infrastructure, and redevelop MLK Elementary School and the adjacent land into a recreation and community center. The HOPE VI implementation has met with criticism locally and in their HUD audit for not meeting the original goals.

⁵ Zielenbach, Sean The Economic Impact of HOPE VI on Neighborhoods. *The Housing Research Foundation*. 7

⁶ Harvard Law Review Association (2003). When Hope Falls Short: HOPE VI, Accountability, and the Privatization of Public Housing. *Harvard Law Review*, 1488.

The target community has been made more economically and racially diverse since HOPE VI began work and some of the local schools have shown improvement. A number of young adult and youth education programs have commenced and two public computer centers have opened. HOPE VI has also accomplished many other immediate goals including the demolition of Washington Courts and the relocation of its residents. Not all of the project’s goals, however, have been met as the Cornhill Commons was never built, and HOPE VI is no longer planning to build it. Also, not all of the planned housing units were built and many claim that homeownership was never promoted to the citizens in the target communities. This has caused a wave of controversy in Cornhill and throughout the city of Utica as community members insist they were never involved in the process. St. Paul’s Baptist Church is now lobbying for approval to go ahead with the abandoned plan for a community center. The new goals of the project have been adapted in light of the little more than a year remaining in the grant to be achievable in the given time frame.

The Utica Municipal Housing Authority

The Utica Municipal Housing Authority (UMHA) is the major provider of subsidized housing in the City of Utica, New York and operates public housing units as well as a Housing Choice rental assistance program. Currently, the UMHA owns and operates 1,041 public housing units and is the administrative agent for 690 units of Section 8 rental assistance. To date, the UMHA reports that it has successfully completed the following: developed 128 homeownership and rental units in the Cornhill neighborhood of Utica (109 mixed finance units and 19 homeownership units;)

relocated 59 former Washington Courts residents to better housing opportunities; demolished the Washington Courts complex and transferred the property to the City of Utica for a use as an industrial site; leveraged \$36,110,773 in collateral housing and in-kind community service investments; developed a computer training center and playground at Martin Luther King School; entered into 22 construction contracts with Section 3 to include minority and female business enterprises; and increased the neighborhood's tax base and property values. They also cite contributions from the City of Utica in the amount of \$5,485,841 in housing development, infrastructure improvements, codes enforcement, planning, community policing, and economic development funding to the project.

By the end of 2008, the UMHA expects to complete up to 21 additional homeownership units. Oneida Homes is the homeownership development component of the HOPE VI project. It is conceived as a multi-year initiative of the City of Utica and the UMHA to develop homeownership opportunities for residents of public housing, the Cornhill neighborhood, and the City of Utica. Oneida Homes involves the construction and sale of single-family homes to low-income first-time homebuyers on scattered sites in the HOPE VI Revitalization Area. It will be marketed to current neighborhood residents, tenants of the former Washington Courts public housing development and Utica's large immigrant population. In order to concentrate redevelopment activity for maximum community impact, the proposed project will be built on model blocks in Utica's Cornhill neighborhood. Of the twenty-one units still to be developed, there will be two 3 bedroom accessible units and nineteen 4 bedroom units. The units will

have low-maintenance exteriors, new appliances, and will be designed to be energy efficient.

UMHA further reports that the HOPE VI Project is in the process of completing the planned number of housing units by the end of the grant term. To date, 109 tax credit rental replacement housing units have been completed in conjunction with the UMHA and a not-for-profit developer – Housing Visions Consultants, Inc.

In addition to City of Utica funds, the UMHA secured \$1,140,000 in funding from the County of Oneida, the State of New York Empire State Development, and the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal HOME program to finance a home improvement program targeted to the HOPE VI Revitalization Area. The Home Preservation Program will involve the moderate rehabilitation of up to 40 owner occupied housing units in the Cornhill neighborhood of the City of Utica. They state that the Program is integral to their comprehensive neighborhood redevelopment strategy and to ensure the success of the entire HOPE VI project through the rehabilitation of existing homes, and will protect the investment and marketability of other HOPE VI housing development.

With the ongoing support provided from the City of Utica to UMHA, the Utica City School District has also been a recipient in our HOPE VI revitalization efforts. In conjunction with the School District and Oneida County Workforce Development, UMHA developed a Neighborhood Networks Center at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in Cornhill. This initiative of UMHA, funded by a HUD \$300,000 Neighborhood Networks grant, has been providing services to the students of MLK and the Cornhill community

through its educational programs of job skills development and remedial education. Also, as the first step in the Cornhill Commons Project, a new playground was installed on the grounds of the Martin Luther King, Jr. School. The playground was constructed in June 2006 with the assistance of over 70 volunteers and a partnership between UMHA, RMV and the Utica City School District. A total of \$96,270 in non-HUD funds were contributed to this project. Through a Governor Member Item, the State of New York provided a grant of \$30,000 for the development of the playground.

Program and Service Population Description

The population of Cornhill is comprised of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds – primarily Black, Hispanic, and White, but also including refugees and immigrants who have come to Utica from a number of different countries over the last 20 years. Income levels are lower in the HOPE VI target area than in the City as a whole; for instance 68 percent of residents of the target area have incomes under \$25,000, while just 50 percent of city residents overall have household incomes under \$25,000. Also, twice as many households (21.4% vs. 10.5%) have incomes over \$50,000 in the City as compared to the target area. Educational achievement is low; in the city as a whole for those over age 25, 23.4 percent of white non-Hispanic males and 27 percent of females lack a high school diploma or GED. For Black males and females, the percentages rise to 41.4 percent and 31.7 percent, and for Hispanic males and females, 56.3 percent and 43.6 percent.

⁷ In the target area, educational achievement is similar, but higher

⁷ Owens-Manley, 2006, p. 24-25

percentages of males are without a high school education (see Table 1).

	Target area of Cornhill	City of Utica
Black Male	46.4%	41.8%
Black Female	31.6%	31.7%
Hispanic Male	62.8%	56.3%
Hispanic Female	35.4%	43.6%
White non-Hispanic Male	25.4%	23.4%
White non-Hispanic Female	23.8%	27.0%

Table 1. Residents over age 25 without a high school diploma or its equivalency: comparison of target area to city of Utica. (Owens-Manley, 2006; original data source is Census 2000 population data)

Unemployment rates are higher for the male population but especially high for the black male population in the city as a whole as well as the target area.⁸ The percentage of black males age 16 and over in the labor force who are employed is just 59 percent (target area) and 56 percent (city), compared to 94 percent and 91 percent for white males. Interestingly, Hispanic male employment is very high, even though educational achievement is as low as or lower than black males. Employment of black females is also high compared to black males (91% target area; 88% city) (See Table 2.)

The fact that employment percentages may be slighter higher in the target area than in the city as a whole should not dismiss the issue. The disparities for black males is in urgent need of attention. Also, higher percentages of males and females in the target area are employed in the service sector, notorious for low-paying jobs (24%

⁸ Owens-Manley, Judith; *Hope VI-Utica, New York, Year 3 Program Evaluation*; 2006, Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center, Hamilton College, pp.26-28

target area vs. 20% city for males and 32% target area vs. 21% city for females.)⁹

	Target Area of Cornhill	City of Utica
Black Male	59%	56%
Black Female	91%	88%
Hispanic Male	100%	81%
Hispanic Female	91%	87%
White non-Hispanic Male	94%	91%
White non-Hispanic Female	96%	94%

Table 2. Percentage of males and females age 16 and over in the labor force who are employed: comparison by gender and ethnicity (Owens-Manley, 2006; original data source is Census 2000 employment data.)

The target area residents are slightly more likely to be female-headed households; 43 percent as compared to 39 percent in the city. A larger percentage of households (27.6% vs. 20%) had incomes under \$10,000 annually, and not quite half of households in the target area (10.5% vs. 21.4%) had incomes over \$50,000 per year. The largest percentage of households in the target area had incomes between \$10,000 and \$25,000 per year – 40.3% as compared to 29.8 percent of households in all of the city of Utica. This reflects greater need in the target area but also a general issue of poverty for the city as a whole.¹⁰

Evaluation Methodology

Eight focus groups were conducted in Cornhill with 2-8 participants per group. Seven of the groups were comprised of

⁹ Owens-Manley, Judith; *Hope VI-Utica, New York, Year 3 Program Evaluation*; 2006, Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center, Hamilton College, p.30

¹⁰ Owens-Manley, Judith; *Hope VI-Utica, New York, Year 3 Program Evaluation*; 2006, Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center, Hamilton College, pp. 26-27.

residents of the neighborhood, and one of the focus groups was conducted with invited members of the HOPE VI Task Force, in order to have the perspective of key leaders involved in service provision to the Cornhill residents. Student researcher teams of two worked with seven agencies to identify and recruit residents for the focus groups. The size of the focus groups was ideal because everyone participating has the “opportunity to share insights and... provide (a) diversity of perceptions”¹¹ of the HOPE VI Program. Participants who are residents of Cornhill filled out a brief survey at the beginning of the focus groups. A confidentiality clause was provided on the front of the survey to ensure that participants understood that their answers would not be identifiable in any reporting of the information and to give them the freedom to speak. Resident participants were paid a \$10 stipend for their time and participation.

Focus groups were conducted by the pair of student researchers, with one student facilitating and the other taking extensive notes. The key leaders group was the exception in that the principal investigator and program evaluator of record, Dr. Judith Owens-Manley, co-facilitated the group with the student researcher, and both took notes. Notes were summarized into interview transcripts and analyzed for major themes. Student teams created individual reports for each agency that recruited participants for a focus group, and the reports are combined and edited here for one report to the community. The major themes drawn from the eight focus groups are reported here with direct quotes from participants for illustration or emphasis of key points in the analysis.

¹¹ Krueger, Richard A., “Focus Groups,” Chapter 2, pp. 17

Limitations

The focus groups as designed and implemented do not purport to be representative of all voices in Cornhill. Outreach was conducted through community agencies, each of which recruited participants in its own way. Participants are a fractional percentage of the total population of the target area for HOPE VI, and the demographics are in some cases dissimilar to the overall demographics of the area. Yet the voices heard in the focus groups have important things to say about their perceptions of the project, and they should be taken in such a context – an important contribution, and not definitive of what is right and wrong about the project.

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business enterprises; and increased the neighborhood's tax base and property values. They also cite contributions from the City of Utica in the amount of \$5,485,841 in housing development, infrastructure improvements, codes enforcement, planning, community policing, and economic development funding to the project.

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\$96,270 in non-HUD funds were contributed to this project. Through a Governor Member Item, the State of New York provided a grant of \$30,000 for the development of the playground.

Participants in the Focus Groups

Twenty-seven residents of the HOPE VI target area of Cornhill participated in seven focus groups, and eight key leaders participated in one additional focus group. Most of the residents (89%) were **heads of households**, and three were not. Just over half were homeowners (55.6%), and twelve respondents rented their home or apartment. All but one described their street as a **mixture of racial and ethnic groups** (one person said their street was comprised of almost entirely one racial or ethnic group). Well over one-third are **long-term residents**, having lived in the neighborhood for five years or more, and most of the third lived there for more than ten years (29.6%). An additional 40.7 percent lived there for over one year and up to five years, so that only 22 percent lived there for less than one year. Nearly three-quarters of respondents said they had a few friends or family that lived in the neighborhood and 11 percent said that they had many. Fifteen percent reported no friends or family in the same neighborhood.

More than half of the focus group participants were Black (55.5%), and 18.5 percent each identified themselves as White, non-Hispanic and White, Hispanic. Two individuals labeled themselves as other. Nearly **three-quarters are in prime working years**, ages 30-64 (74%), and 18.5 percent were between the ages of 18 and 29. Two individuals were retired and 65 years or older.

This is a **more educated group than would be representative of the neighborhood** in general. Only one individual had less than a high school degree or equivalency, compared to the much higher percentages for the target area as a whole (see Table 1, p. 3.) The majority of the respondents had at least some college or vocational school training beyond high school (85%), and seven reported having either a Bachelor's or Master's degree. **Income levels, given educational achievement, were low.** Eight households had less than \$10,000 in annual income (29.6%), five families had income between \$10,000 and \$20,000 (18.5%), and six families had income between \$20,000 and \$30,000 (22.2%). Nearly half of the families had household income of less than \$20,000 (48%), and only eight households had income of more than \$30,000 per year (18.5%), fewer than one in five.

Of the eight households with less than \$10,000 in income, four might be explained by unemployed heads of household. The other four, though, indicated that they were employed, and both retired individuals had relatively sufficient incomes.

Eighteen of the respondents were employed (13 full-time and 5 part-time), and nine were unemployed. Of the unemployed, two were retired, two in school and not looking for work, and the other five were looking for work. Of the five people who were seeking employment, three were also in school, and one person indicated not having been able to find work.

Results

Participants of the resident focus groups completed short surveys prior to the start of the focus group interview. The survey

included brief, Likert-scale questions about neighborhood satisfaction, satisfaction with key services, and perceptions about people in the neighborhood, in addition to demographic information (Appendix A). Overall, just over three-quarters of respondents (78%) were somewhat or very satisfied with the neighborhood in which they live and are similarly satisfied with their neighbors (80%). Adequate entertainment and recreational facilities are found to be lacking, with 74 percent and 67 percent of residents dissatisfied, respectively. Residents also expressed dissatisfaction with after-school programs (65%), but more satisfaction with the public schools in the neighborhood (68%).

Service programs were less satisfying to respondents. Eighty-eight percent were dissatisfied with job training programs, and sixty percent were dissatisfied with the availability of adult GED education programs. Drug and alcohol services were also unsatisfactory (55.5%), and 44 percent were dissatisfied with medical services available. Although not a majority, this was a significant percentage of the respondents.

Several questions asked the participants about their perceptions of people in the neighborhood, generally used for a measure of social cohesion. About 60 percent said that people could get help from others if they were in trouble, and 81 percent said that people in the neighborhood could be trusted. A majority also said that people in the neighborhood shared the same values (74%), but only 42 percent reported that if there was a serious problem in the neighborhood that people would get together to solve it. Just over half of the respondents replied positively to the statement that being a member of the neighborhood is like being a member of a group of friends (55.5%).

Item on Likert Scale 1-4	Mean	%
Satisfied with neighborhood	3.0	78%
Satisfied with neighbors	3.1	80%
Satisfied with medical services	2.5	56%
Satisfied with drug & alcohol services	2.2	44.5%
Satisfied with adult GED programs	2.2	40%
Satisfied with after-school programs	2.2	35%
Satisfied with recreational facilities	2.0	33%
Satisfied with public schools	2.7	32%
Satisfied with entertainment facilities	1.9	26%
Satisfied with job training programs	1.6	12%

Table 1. Responses from focus groups of Cornhill residents in target area of HOPE VI (30 participants, 27 surveys, n=27)

Several questions asked the participants about their **perceptions of people in the neighborhood, generally used for a measure of social cohesion**. About 60 percent said that people could get help from others if they were in trouble, and 81 percent said that people in the neighborhood could be trusted. A majority also said that people in the neighborhood shared the same values (74%), but only 42 percent reported that if there was a serious problem in the neighborhood that people would get together to solve it. Just over half of the respondents replied positively to the statement that being a member of the neighborhood is like being a member of a group of friends (55.5%).

Item on Likert Scale 1-4	Mean	%
People can get help from others if they are in trouble.	2.8	60%

People in this neighborhood can be trusted.	2.8	81%
People in this neighborhood share the same values	2.8	74%
If there was a serious problem in the neighborhood, the people can get together to solve it.	2.5	42%
Being a member of the neighborhood is like being a member of a group of friends.	2.7	55.5%

Table 2. Responses from focus groups of Cornhill residents in target area of HOPE VI (30 participants, 27 surveys, n=27)

Focus Group Results

Focus group reports were prepared individually for each hosting organization and then combined here for a final edited report for the Utica Municipal Housing Authority. In this way, confidentiality was assured. In the focus group interviews, one consistent criticism of the HOPE VI Project seemed intensified because of the original grand design of the proposal for community revitalization. That is, when one begins to believe that a difference will be made, and that it will be a difference that makes a difference, it is more disappointing, proportionately, than when one watches cynically, expecting nothing. Several people in different focus groups expressed that level of disappointment. Their initial high hopes dissipated or waned over time, as the project “dragged on.” One focus group member referred to the HOPE VI Program as the “HOPE FOR” program since “they just left us hoping for all of the promises they made to come true.”

Major themes highlighted in the interviews concerned the **elements of community revitalization**; meeting the **needs of the community for capacity-building and building social capital**; creating an environment for new and renovated housing that is **safe and aesthetically pleasing**; and **engaging the citizenry** in the process of community building from start to finish. Often themes were expressed in dichotomies. For instance, there was an appreciation for the new housing, paired with a criticism of the quality of the houses and the context in which the houses still sit – the physical surroundings. A second concern expressed was for the leadership of the project, although that was accompanied by an appreciation for the expansive program design that they started with. And a third major theme concerned a split in the way Cornhill itself was viewed, either as worthy of intervention and a place of hope, or an undesirable place to live that was beyond hope.

Community Revitalization: Build People,
Not Houses

The possibility of a state-of-the-art community center around which the community could revolve created excitement in the beginning. One person explained,

[That Community Center] could have been the sun that pulled all of Cornhill together and held it together; creating a real and stable community that could build people.

Another group discussed how idealistic the project was from the start with its “super-duper plans.” Speaking in retrospect,

participants did not think it was even possible to live up to those initial goals.

Many strongly felt that the failure of the HOPE VI Project to build the community center became another example of its failure to truly commit to revitalizing Cornhill. When the Project first began, most of the participants, and, according to them, most of their fellow community members, were under the impression that the HOPE VI mission encompassed a wide variety of community-related projects, such as the Cornhill Commons and a new community school – projects that would help to strengthen Cornhill in areas other than property value. A major critique then became the perceived failure of HOPE VI to build anything *but* houses. As one participant explained,

The problem is that you have all of these brand-new houses that HOPE VI has built, and they aren't going to do anything, because the people haven't been built.

That disappointment with the failure to come through with a Community School/Community Center for Cornhill is not attributed solely to the HOPE VI management. One participant offered, “If they were expecting HOPE VI to fix all of the ills of the community, it failed. All of the partnerships would have had to step up. Housing is [only] a start.” One participant who had been present for some of the planning explained that partner organizations were recruited to co-develop initiatives, but many failed to follow through on their commitments. Community agencies were described as having signed on “with no intention to complete projects,” and the community school was described as “dead on arrival.”

Several participants did not know that the HOPE VI grant money was confined to the construction of housing. The general feeling was that they had not seen major changes happen within the community. They experienced no changes in education or job training, although they saw those areas significantly lacking within the community.

The lack of job creation, especially given the high rate of unemployment for minorities in Cornhill, was a big disappointment for residents. Many had hoped that the construction would bring new jobs to neighborhood residents, but instead those jobs were contracted to a non-local construction firm that brought in its own men. Several participants referred to these workers as “outsiders.” One man expressed the feelings of many when he said, “This is MY neighborhood!” One man did point out that Utica might not have had qualified or certified construction workers, and they may have been forced to recruit from outside of the community. Still, one vocal participant stated, “I want to walk by a job site and see just one person from Cornhill working there, one black man.”

Neighborhood Improvement: Meet the Need

Participants agreed that HOPE VI has constructed many new and affordable houses. One point of disagreement was that the members did not see the value in having them in Cornhill, because the neighborhood was still not at a point where outsiders would actually want to move in, regardless of how good of a deal they could get on a house. Residents thought that more should be done:

It was like they sprayed perfume on us when we needed a shower.

In one focus group, there was agreement amongst the participants that the HOPE VI homes have made a perceptible difference in the tone of the neighborhood and in some cases have even inspired neighbors to take better care of their properties.

Some participants, though, believed that little neighborhood change had been realized. One participant said he noticed “no noticeable change,” while acknowledging that community revitalization is “tricky to measure.” Others agreed that the new houses look nice on the outside but “they need to do more than just rebuild the house.” Others thought the homes themselves were inadequate, with structural problems from the beginning and “shoddy construction.” They commented on the prefabricated homes as an indicator of “rushed building.” The same group predicted that the homes would have “no more than a 20 year lifespan,” and noted that several homes already had sanitation and drainage problems. One group of homeowners cited drywall cracking and railings breaking but acknowledged that the required home ownership classes were very helpful.

The number of vacant homes was a source of frustration also. They suggested that vacancies resulted from potential buyers being uninformed about criteria and process for ownership, and they also noted that the criteria for home ownership did not fit the demographic of the Cornhill residents, whom they viewed as the “target group.” This group was, however, supportive of the emphasis on home ownership, indicating that ownership changes a community, since the people who own homes are more likely to take pride in the physical appearance of their home and neighborhood. At the same time, they did point out that people from

Washington Courts and public housing in general would not be prepared to maintain their own homes; they were “not ready to mow their own grass.”

Many participants voiced displeasure with the neighborhood infrastructure and the physical condition of their surroundings. The roads seemed to be one of the biggest problems, with participants citing damages to their cars on roads “worse than country roads.” Some sidewalks and driveways had been resurfaced and some houses freshly repainted, but residents were not satisfied with these minor improvements. The condition of the roads and the condition of distressed properties nearby were thought to reflect poorly on the improved properties in-between. Respondents suggested a greater concentration of new development and improved properties in the same area, as a method of dealing with the problem and maximizing UMHA’s and the City’s investment. Participants believed that the HOPE VI Project should concentrate on improving conditions in the smaller, focused area of Cornhill and were opposed to the new HOPE VI plan to build houses elsewhere in Utica, including West Utica.

Alienation and Disconnection: A Call for a Participatory Process

A focus on neighborhood awareness and involvement about not only the HOPE VI Project and its intended goals but also community services such as education and training opportunities was recommended. One participant said that program organizers could have sent out letters to give people information about housing opportunities, while another thought that word of mouth was the best way for the community to be informed. Overall, community information sharing and discussion was thought to be poor and to affect residents’ knowledge and

participation both in HOPE VI and other opportunities.

If you live in an area where you participate more, you have more of an interest. You build something and you have to let them see how it goes. It becomes a part of you when it starts to grow.

Others thought the communications about HOPE VI were misleading and agreed that they were unhappy with UMHA and HOPE VI. One woman said that UMHA “did not keep their word for anything!” She complained that \$50 worth of back rent kept her from even being eligible for a new home when Washington Courts residents were supposed to have the first opportunities. Her friend also complained, “[UMHA] picked and chose where [relocated residents] went, and I don’t think that’s right.” One group called UMHA “home wreckers” in response to its handling of St. Paul’s Baptist Church’s desire to build a community center, originally promised by UMHA but never delivered. Participants in this group insisted, “Nobody likes it. You say HOPE VI and it’s like a dirty word.

Some participants presented a general distrust toward the government and leadership, which were used as interchangeable terms. They said the project represented “\$11 million worth of corruption” and that you just “needed to be in the ‘in-crowd’.” A lot of their problems believing in the project were connected to their perceptions of too little accountability for inaction, for finances, for failed promises, etc. They commented that leaders were “blanketing” the process with so many meetings, with one man stating, “Cornhill is a cash cow for the government.”

A disconnection between project and residents was a nearly unanimous expression. Residents of Cornhill felt that they were not involved in the planning process and that they were not kept informed on what was going on. They were never exactly sure what the goals of the program were or who was supposed to benefit. Many people, particularly former Washington Courts residents, became lost in that process; some even thought that they would be given one of the new HOPE VI homes free of charge. There was confusion about what exactly it took to get into one of the new homes and how long a buyer would have to live there before they could sell. According to participants, all of this discord gave the community the impression that the HOPE VI project was never really intended to benefit Cornhill but, instead, the people who were involved with the grant.

The perceived disconnect between the neighborhood and the HOPE VI Project really seemed to dishearten the members of another focus group. They claimed that the rest of Cornhill was very bitter, too, about the whole process. They were disappointed that the project did not go how they wanted it to and that the community was never given a chance to be heard, in their view, in the decision-making process.

It was like some big guy wanted to get his hands on some money, found this HOPE VI and then slapped it onto Utica and Cornhill so that he could get his hands on the money. We just got robbed again, it's that simple.

The displeasure hearkened back to the way in which the destruction of Washington Courts Housing Project was handled, because that process resulted in

diminishing the black community's political power in Utica. One man stated:

When they relocated the Washington Courts' residents and then scattered them all over the city, they broke up a powerful black voice and voting section of Utica.

Safety and Well-Being: An Undesirable Place to Live?

One of the larger focus groups, with participants who had resided in Cornhill for significant lengths of time, described their neighborhood as a fairly undesirable place to live. One man explained of the many vacant properties, "Even if they could buy it, nine times outta ten they're not gonna buy it, 'cause it's in Cornhill." In general, they felt that if people were going to look to enter the housing market, they were not going to do so in a Cornhill neighborhood. Even if the houses sold, they predicted that the residents would quickly leave, and the homes would "turn back into crack houses." They explained that people would not buy a home where they know their neighbors will not be taking care of their own home and property. This led to a suggestion that HOPE VI should cluster homes more, so that "people are coming in with the same mentality." Pockets of new development would present "potential for community within the larger community."

Many participants acknowledged that the neighborhood could be safer, though others thought that crime in Cornhill is not as bad as people from the outside would think. Several parents said they did not feel safe letting their children walk to school. The view of lack of safety was expressed by several people, but with an

acknowledgement that there were no easy answers.

Midnight shooting gets annoying, There are times that I worry and I don't walk around after dark by myself. We let my kids ride their bikes around the block, but we have them come back every few minutes.

It's not safe. One minute everything is safe and then the next minute there's a gunshot. Police need to look out more. But what are they really going to do? You see kids on this corner and that corner, but what are you going to do?

Concern was expressed over and over again in some groups about how unsafe the participants felt. One woman complained about prostitutes and drug dealers at one end of her street, but she did mention that the neighborhood was working with the police to have them removed. Yet other groups agreed that they felt safe in their neighborhood, despite the recent shooting of a police officer. One group member stated, "Safety concerns are exaggerated. The problems are there, but the problems are over-hyped." These participants tended to be positive about the police presence in Cornhill, saying that the police were around and were responsive to issues. They also felt safe because of their pride in their community saying that "the most wonderful people that I've ever met live in Cornhill."

Several respondents spoke of how highly they valued recreational activity opportunities for the children. They described existing facilities as poor and few, and stated that there are not enough activities for the children to take part in.

Drainage is bad, and so the [soccer field] floods. They have tried to put

an exercise path in that is half-done like the soccer field but never completed. I have gone on it with my kids, but it's not fun having to avoid mud puddles and everything.

Another participant offered a similar view:

Whenever they have any kind of activity around here I push [my kids] into it. they need to have Big Brother and Big Sisters. There ain't nothing for them to do around here. If you have games and toys for them, then they are not going to get influenced by the outside. It's tough because you have to get your kids outside and can't let them stay inside and get soft. They need to have a function and activity and things for them to do.

Discussion

HOPE VI project staff and administrators are believed to have had very good intentions for the improvement of the community by most respondents. Despite good intentions, however, indicators of community dissatisfaction with the HOPE VI project remain strong. Overall, focus group participants indicted that the HOPE VI project in Utica has fallen short of their original hopes and expectations. Many community members indicate that they feel more was promised than was actually delivered. Furthermore, much of the community remains distressed economically. Those who have moved into the new housing units are reported to be complaining that the quality of the new units is substandard and "they begin to fall apart right away."

The general tone taken away from the focus groups was one of frustration. The

participants believed that HOPE VI should and could have been a more positive experience for the community. Instead they felt that by failing to incorporate residents as an integral part of the planning and implementation process, the project failed at many of its intended goals. They noted the lack of community-centeredness in a multi-million dollar project directly impacting the community. Respondents have not felt enough of a personal or community impact and benefit.

The dissatisfaction of the community is very disappointing to those working on the project, but the main disappointment with the HOPE VI program appeared to be its failure to establish or build any type of community. Focus group participants kept going back to the fact that nothing had been built in Cornhill but houses, and those houses were useless, since the people and the community had yet to be built. Many participants blamed the failure of the Cornhill Commons on what they described as HOPE VI's refusal to meet with community members and discuss what needed to be done. Respondents reported that there were no improvements in education or job training as the project had promised.

It was felt that the program did not provide a sufficient loan program for people who wanted to purchase their own house. Many of the people who wanted to purchase a new home built by HOPE VI needed a good deal of help with their finances and would have had a better chance in purchasing a home if a financial program was implemented before the program was underway. The houses were built so they could be sold at a low cost, but many people would still need loans and financial advice. Credit presented a significant obstacle to home ownership. Many residents of the target area are unable

to qualify for HOPE VI housing due to problematic credit scores.

Participants did not believe that the project had created enough home-ownership opportunities and believed that there had been a shift towards providing more rental opportunities. Participants expressed widespread displeasure and indignation at the condition of neighborhood infrastructure, specifically road conditions and problems of trash accumulation in the neighborhood. Community services was another area in which participants believed that HOPE VI had not lived up to its original goals. Despite these negative views of the HOPE VI project, some participants believed that Cornhill is a better and safer place as a result of the HOPE VI project. One group of participants was especially pleased with the police presence in Cornhill and stated that residents had a great sense of pride in their community. This sense of satisfaction appeared to vary by block within the target area.

Summary and Recommendations

In order for HOPE VI to have any success during its final year in Utica, we recommend that administrators first and foremost meet with key Cornhill community members. This would help both clear the air and reacquaint both HOPE VI and Cornhill with each other's goals, capacities, and limitations. We recommend that a community center be constructed in Cornhill, as was the main hope of our focus group members. We also recommend that HOPE VI make it generally easier, through lower restrictions or more available loans, for people to move into their houses. Without people in the newly constructed houses, they are of no use to anyone. If the standards do not need to be lowered, or cannot be lowered, the information

regarding HOPE VI housing needs to be more available, so people are less confused and intimidated by it. HOPE VI administrators may consider forming a partnership with lending institutions to help otherwise qualified buyers overcome this hurdle.

Participants had suggestions for UMHA in the remaining year of HOPE VI. First, residents want improved infrastructure around the neighborhood; smoother sidewalks that are cleared in the winter, better street lighting, and more efficient garbage removal. Second, they want a larger police presence in Cornhill. And third, they want better recreational facilities so the children can avoid drugs and violence. They believed this would have been a more efficient use of the HOPE VI grant instead of building new homes, in dilapidated areas, that still sit vacant.

The focus group participants offered a number of other thoughtful suggestions to be considered for the remainder of the HOPE VI grant and for future projects. They suggested publicizing the project and process for obtaining the new homes to better serve and involve the residents. The residents also proposed that new housing be concentrated to specific areas to try to build a sense of community among the new

homeowners. In general, the group also shared the belief that the grant should focus on doing a few renovations well rather than excessive, scattered, and poorer quality builds. For future projects, the group noted the need to have strong, committed leadership and a solid plan with goals developed for and by the community. The participants were realistic about the needs of the community, and, although HOPE VI was referred to as a “missed opportunity,” one participant offered an important closing perspective, “If they were expecting HOPE VI to fix all of the ills of the community, it failed. All the partnerships would have had to step up. Housing is a start.” There should be a significant emphasis on job training and new opportunities for employment.

The HOPE VI project should remain focused on building homes and revitalizing Cornhill; it should not dilute the positive effects of home-building and neighborhood revitalization by spreading into other parts of Utica. And finally, the HOPE VI project should ensure that the City of Utica and Oneida County carry out their original agreements to improve infrastructure in the target area. In its remaining months, HOPE VI could direct its funds and political power to make sure that these things are addressed.

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