Ellen Wilson Dwellings," in An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI, Cross-site report

Jenell Paris
Messiah College, jparis@messiah.edu

Brett Williams

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An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI

Volume I
Cross-site Report
An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI

Volume I
Cross-site Report

Prepared for:
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Office of Policy Development and Research

Prepared by:
Abt Associates Inc.
Linda B. Fosburg, Ph.D.
Susan J. Popkin, Ph.D.
Gretchen P. Locke

July 1996
HOPE VI, also known as the Urban Revitalization Demonstration, is a bold attempt to transform distressed public housing. In HOPE VI, the Congress and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have shown that they are willing to erase 60 years of program rules and let local actors decide the best way to house and provide social and community services to their poorest citizens. The task of revitalizing the most distressed public housing in America is not an easy one. The easing of Federal requirements for public housing alone does not reverse the conditions that have come to prevail in these distressed developments.

Sixty years of experience with public housing has taught policy makers what does not work for public housing and what might work. HOPE VI provides an opportunity to test ideas that have promise. These ideas must not only avoid the mistakes of the past, but they must also repair the damage that has already been done. Some of the challenges faced include welfare dependency, the decline of many center cities, poor public housing management, decreasing operating subsidies, crime, the dramatic increase in single parent households, poor design of buildings, inappropriate unit size, and racial and economic isolation. Doug Rae eloquently addresses these conditions in his Elm Haven HOPE VI case study: “A great deal is to be expected of HOPE VI, but we should not expect even the wisest use of HOPE VI funding to quickly reverse problems which have been given two generations’ head start”.

HUD has thus taken a long-term approach for evaluating the program. This report, An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI, is the first step in an evaluation that will closely track the interventions and outcomes at 15 of the HOPE VI grantees for a minimum of ten years. In the long-term, this evaluation will document activities and changes in the sites, the neighborhoods, and, most important, the families, to provide local and national policy guidance on strategies for housing poor families.

This first report explores the first few miles of the HOPE VI journey. It describes the sites as they began the program and identifies the plans for revitalizing each development. One challenge for this assessment is capturing the uniqueness of each site, both in terms of the characteristics of the developments and the residents, as well as in the plans for carrying out HOPE VI. This study addressed this challenge by involving researchers who live near the HOPE VI communities in the evaluation. These local researchers collected historical and baseline information for each of the sites and prepared the case studies that appear in volume two of this report. Each of the case studies is clearly unique in its focus and assessment.

At the same time, national policy-making requires an assessment of the overall effect of HOPE VI. Volume one of this report draws from the case studies and provides insights that can only be learned by comparing and contrasting the site characteristics and the challenges that each faces.

This three volume report shows the conditions that HOPE VI is designed to improve. It describes 15 HOPE VI sites, the processes they used to prepare revitalization plans, and the vision each developed for transforming highly distressed public housing into vibrant urban communities. The report also outlines many of the challenges they will face as they continue to move forward.

Michael A. Stegman
Assistant Secretary
The contents of this report are the views of the contractor and do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of the Department of Housing and Urban Development or the U.S. Government.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATLANTA</th>
<th>Larry Keating, Ph.D. A.I.C.T.</th>
<th>DETROIT</th>
<th>Robert W. Marans, Ph.D.</th>
<th>John V. Ballard</th>
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<tr>
<td>BALTIMORE</td>
<td>Tony Whitehead, Ph.D.</td>
<td>DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA</td>
<td>Brett Williams, Ph.D.</td>
<td>Jenell Williams</td>
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<td></td>
<td>James Peterson, Jr., MHS</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jonathan Ortiz</td>
<td>Angelito Palma</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Linda Kaljee, MA</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sheri Lawsin</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BOSTON</td>
<td>Langley Keyes, Ph.D.</td>
<td>MILWAUKEE</td>
<td>Calvin Brutus</td>
<td>John Merill, Ph.D.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Charles Adams</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Elsa Gutierrez</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mary Quesada</td>
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<td></td>
<td>David Thatcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAMDEN</td>
<td>Walter H. Moleski</td>
<td>NEW HAVEN</td>
<td>Douglas Rae, Ph.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peter R. Hecht, Ph.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHARLOTTE</td>
<td>Deborah Weisel, MPA</td>
<td>NEW ORLEANS</td>
<td>Timothy Joder, A.I.C.P.</td>
<td>Johnelle Lamarque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deborah Meagher, MPA</td>
<td></td>
<td>Steve Chozick</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CHICAGO</td>
<td>Paul Fischer, Ph.D.</td>
<td>OAKLAND</td>
<td>Victor Rubin, Ph.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUYAHOGA METRO</td>
<td>Darlyne Bailey, Ph.D.</td>
<td>SAN ANTONIO</td>
<td>Susan J. Szaniszlo, M.P.A.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sharon Milligan, Ph.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linda Persse, Ph.D.</td>
<td>SAN FRANCISCO</td>
<td>Michael Reisch, Ph.D.</td>
<td>Felix Rivera, Ph.D.</td>
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ELLEN WILSON - DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Brett Williams, Jenell Williams, Jonathan Ortiz, Angelito Palma, & Sheri Lawson
American University

The Ellen Wilson Dwellings are currently vacant and distressed. The development was built in 1941 on the site of the Navy Place Slums, replacing inadequate alley dwellings occupied by the poor. Located in the Capitol Hill Historic Neighborhood, the Ellen Wilson Dwellings over the years have become increasingly isolated from the rest of the neighborhood. The Capitol Hill Neighborhood is characterized by row and townhouses facing the street, while the Ellen Wilson Development consists of 13 two-story concrete block and brick facade buildings that face inward. In addition to being architecturally distinct, the Ellen Wilson Dwellings were occupied almost entirely by low-income African-Americans, while the rest of the neighborhood is mixed by race and income. Exacerbating these differences is an expressway that runs south of Ellen Wilson. South of the expressway are 2 other public housing developments and several industrial facilities. Though connected by a few underpasses, residents describe the expressway as “the Great Wall of China,” serving as a social barrier between the north and south parts of the neighborhood.

Residents were vacated from Ellen Wilson in 1988. They left a development that was severely troubled. The District of Columbia’s Public Housing Authority was ranked the worst housing authority in the country. To correct a cumbersome and inefficient bureaucracy that did not serve residents well, DPAH has recently gone into receivership under David Gilmore and now operates separately from the city as the D.C. Housing Authority. Gilmore is the third chief of the housing authority since 1992, when Ellen Wilson was selected by HUD to be a HOPE VI site. Poor management and leadership turn-over caused residents of Ellen Wilson to suffer prior to 1988, and the resolution of these issues has delayed HOPE VI redevelopment efforts. Currently plans are proceeding expeditiously under the Alternate Administrator, McHenry/TAG Associates.

The plan developed by the Ellen Wilson Redevelopment Corporation and the District of Columbia’s Public Housing Authority offers an original, thoughtful, many-faceted plan for redevelopment. The guiding principle for the plan is the mixed-income concept. Architecturally, the new development will be consistent with the neighborhood, and mixed income housing is designed to break the social barriers that exist between Capitol Hill neighbors. The plan is holistic, involving physical redevelopment, community services, economic development, and new management and maintenance plans.

Demolition of the existing structure has not yet begun, but abatements are well under way, and the site has received Historic Preservation approval. While this case study is therefore limited, we emphasize the economic and community context of the Ellen Wilson project. We provide evaluation criteria that will ensure appropriate and creative measures of redevelopment. These criteria include social integration with the Capitol Hill neighborhood and improvement in residents’ quality of life. Most importantly, we include ethnographic material emphasizing residents’ perceptions and experiences of home and community in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. Interviews and case studies provide essential insight into the success or failure of social integration and neighborhood stability expected as a result of mixed-income development. The redevelopment of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings should provide safe, affordable, and pleasant housing for Washington’s low-income citizens.