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The Impact of On-Site Resident Services on Residents' Quality of Life in Affordable Housing Developments (Addendum)

by

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Our research team interviewed 13 residents between July and October 2023. 12 of the residents identified as female, and one identified as male. One of the residents spoke Spanish as her first language. All 13 residents we interviewed were older, ranging in age from the late sixties to their nineties. In terms of length of residence, the 13 residents who participated in the interviews had lived at HDC developments from a minimum of 4 years to a maximum of 17 years. In this report addendum, we summarize four main themes and findings.

Theme #1 – Residents most often reported participating in community events.

When asked about their participation in Resident Services' programs, seven residents mentioned participating in community events primarily. It was clear that for many of the residents, they took great delight in socializing and interacting with others. For instance, one resident said, when asked whether she participated in any Resident Services' programs,

I tried to do the community meetings, we're playing bingo this afternoon. I plan to participate. It's always just a lot of fun. I don't care if I don't win. ... I was out running some errands, and I stopped at the Dollar Tree and picked up a few little things for Betty to use for gifts sometimes at bingo. ... I appreciate that somebody puts an awful lot of time and effort into the things they plan sometimes.

It is worth noting that for this resident, it wasn't about winning. She simply enjoyed the activity, to the extent that she would pick up and contribute prizes on her own initiative. A second resident, when asked whether she currently participated in community events, had this to say,

Not now. It's a sad situation. We did have a gentleman who just passed away this month. ... He loved to cook and he would occasionally cook a meal ... and say, "Anyone who wants to participate, now, I'm gonna do it and just come and enjoy and if you want to contribute anything, fine. If you don't, fine again." And he also would run bingo games, and we'd all just go – everybody take something for prizes – could be anything: canned goods, cookies, used household things. ... He would run these bingo games, and they were fun. Anybody could go, you know, it was just a drop-in thing. There is a lady here who – well, I don't like to say this because it's not very Christian – who fancies herself a pastor. And I think she has one of these "send us X number of dollars, and we'll send you a license that you're a pastor." I think that's what she has. But anyway, she runs a Bible study, supposedly. We went to that one time. It was like a Bible study I had never been to – all we heard was her life story. Didn't talk about the Bible at all. But anyways, so we ruled that out, we got rid of that. But for a while, we were running a craft night where people contributed various

things: yarn, scraps of things, anything to do crafts wise. You just got to go and do what you want to do. They were fun.

Despite her dislike of the Bible Study sessions, it was clear that this resident enjoyed the opportunities for socializing and interacting with other residents. She missed the cook-outs, and indicated that she was interested in giving different activities a try.

Yet a third resident had this to say about community events:

I do participate when we have our community meals, like we'll have for Thanksgiving. We have a cookout where it's potluck, and they provide the stuff like hotdogs and hamburgers, and we provide all the side dishes and stuff. We have a lot of that kind of stuff, which is very enjoyable. They had a lot of different things to go do. And they have bingo. They have adult coloring. Once a month, we have a group called "Heart to Heart." I believe they're Mennonite. They come in and sing songs for us.

This resident, like the others, enjoyed the food-centered gatherings and events. She was clear in the delight she took in these events, saying they were enjoyable. She also expressed appreciation for the variety of community events available to her. The food-centered events were also mentioned by a fourth resident, who said that she herself was an introvert, and that she was not interested in socializing. Yet, she pointed out that many of her fellow residents did participate in the community events, saying,

A lot of (other residents) do participate. If there's something like – I think they had someone come in regarding nutrition. So quite a few people went to that. You know, if they plan a Thanksgiving dinner type of dinner or Christmas time, you know, people will bring food sides and the service coordinator will bring in, say, the turkey, so there are functions here for people who choose to go to those.

While this fourth resident described herself as keeping herself to herself, she demonstrated that she paid attention to the ongoing community events, saying,

They have a Bible Study on Wednesday afternoons and then they have one Thursday where it's like a craft get-together but people pretty much do whatever they want. Some people come in and crochet and some people do something else. So it's not like an organized craft thing where everybody learns the same thing. People just kind of get together. I don't participate, but it's really strange. If you happen to go in, it's dead silent because everybody's doing their own thing.

Community events and the opportunities to socialize and interact with others are very much valued by HDC residents. One interview participant lamented about the lack of community events at her development, saying,

That's why I don't like this place. That's the only thing I don't like is we don't have activities. Very rarely. And we asked her yesterday – the activity person – “Why don't we have activities?” And she says, “There's no money.” Well, the Columbia building (where this participant used to live) is also HDC and they get money. ... We might have a speaker like, once every two months. But we don't do crap. We don't. Yeah. We don't do anything. We do have a tenant association.

Later on in the interview, when we asked this resident what she likes least about living at her current HDC development, she returned to the lack of community events again.

No activities. That's the thing that even my friends will say, “Well, you know, if you would've lived in Columbia, this wouldn't be happening.” You had that in Columbia. ... They had lunches once a week, which I think the tenant association made the food. And we had speakers and crafts. We had a lady come in one night – I forget what it was. But we made ceramics.

Only one interview respondent said that they did not wish to participate in community events, saying,

I'm not a joiner. I've never been a coffee clique kind of person. ... Some of the activities are lame. Some of the classes are kind of insulting. That's why I don't go. I mean, the ones that go need it. There are people here that are what I would say “special needs,” and they need to be helped. And of course, we were told from the beginning that this is not a nursing home. It's an apartment complex that you get help with financially and you know, whatever other things.

This resident was the rare exception among this group of interviewees, and she was the only one who felt that the activities were of little value and interest to her.

We mentioned earlier that out of 13 interview participants, only one identified as male.

When we asked him which resident services' programs he participated in, he offered this opinion on community and social events,

One of the things I want to add is that there's a lot of women living here. There's only like – very few men, and the percentage is very, very little. There are three men in either building, and there's three in the other place and that's six men. So we aren't very well represented in these kinds of things that we come up with. So there may be other things that are coming up that's only for women, and I have no idea what they are. ... There is no effort to make sure that there are activities that would also interest men. ... I told them they need a ping pong table – ping pong gets your arms

moving, and is just something to do, and keep you moving. One suggestion that they'd like to have the whole community room filled with tables and chairs, and there is no open space. Nobody can do anything. We also want something outside to fill up space. Quoits is a German thing – very similar to horseshoes. That's something that men are used to doing.

This resident is interested in participating in community and social events. However, he felt that there was a lack of variety in types of events available, and that more options should be provided that would appeal to men.

Theme #2 – Residents do not feel that they need the programs Resident Services provide, and request other types of services.

Many of the interview respondents do not know of nor think they need to participate in the other programs offered by Resident Services. Five residents saw themselves as sufficient and not needing the services. For instance, one respondent said that she did not utilize the services because she had no need for them, saying,

I have not gone to any of the aid programs. I mean, at this point, I don't feel like I need to, but the time may come. ... I didn't feel like I needed, you know, as far as like with this stuff, the financial aid, the things that are available out there, because I have no clue what it might all be out there. And I say if I don't need it, I shouldn't be using it. ... They occasionally have meetings where somebody will be here from different areas, you know, and talk about different subjects. So that – just that kind of information would be what I've heard.

Later in the interview, when asked if she would be interested in receiving more information about Resident Services, she did not express any interest or receptiveness.

In a similar vein, a second resident, when asked about her participation in other Resident Services programs (excluding community events), had this to say,

I don't really need the services. I know there are others that need it more. I don't need the monthly food boxes and stuff like that. My finances are fine. I'd rather leave that for people that really need it.

Yet a third resident, when asked why she didn't participate in Resident Services' programs, said very firmly,

Because I am an independent person, and I keep my own home, and I can take care of myself.

While this is a very small sample, the firmness with which interview participants responded behoove us to think more carefully about their responses. To establish a rapport with the residents, we generally began the interviews asking residents to tell us a little bit about their background, and how they came to live at HDC. It was clear that – regardless of whether they were happy about living at an HDC development – for all of the interview participants, this was not their first choice of housing. These residents displayed a clear understanding that they really did not have any other viable housing options. In this context, it makes sense that residents would need/want to reassure themselves that they are still independent, and still capable of standing on their own two feet. This clearly needs to be researched more in-depth, but we hypothesize that for residents in affordable housing, especially those who are older and have no other housing options, not utilizing Resident Services might be their way of maintaining their autonomy and dignity.

What, then, do residents in these interviews tell us they would like to have in terms of services? Their requests fall broadly into two categories: those requiring transportation and technology. For services requiring transportation, three residents pointed to the usefulness of having on-site vaccine clinics, with two of them saying,

Another thing is like – they have a vaccine clinic. They're going to be coming next month so people can get their flu shots. I believe they did the same thing when COVID first struck, and they got the first COVID vaccines.

They'll do things for the vaccine here. Have the flu shot or get together with Walgreens or somebody and have it here.

Two residents talked about how much they appreciated the Bookmobile from the public library, with a resident offering the following,

One of the things I have taken part in is the Bookmobile because you know, if you don't have a car, you're not going anywhere, so they come once a month and which is nice because you know, people who are avid readers get to enjoy a book for a whole month so that's nice.

In terms of technology, two residents expressed their desire for assistance with requesting services and access to technology. One resident, after indicating that there is no

computer room in her building, also told us that she doesn't have a computer, and that having access to a computer room would be very helpful to her, since many agencies have moved their services through an online portal. A second resident, when asked whether they had voiced her concerns about needs and services at the development, said,

Well, no, but I could have used it last month. My friends were too busy and my caseworker was too busy. But I needed help getting on – what do you call it? Cable free access or whatever? Or you only pay \$9.95 for your cable, your phone, and your internet. Every year, you have to reapply. I couldn't figure out how to do it, and no one was there to help me. ... I reached out to everyone I could think of here. And everybody said they're too busy.

These findings are in line with what we found from the survey results. In the survey results, many residents discussed their increasing lack of mobility and transportation. Hence, for services like vaccine clinics and bookmobiles to be brought to them at the development was very much appreciated. In the survey results, we also found that for many residents, it was the “tasks of daily living” with which many were concerned, and access to computers and computing services (along with navigating bureaucracy at the cable company) fit right into this category.

Theme #3 – Relationships are important to residents.

As we saw from the surveys, it is important to the respondents that they have good relationships and interactions with the staff in charge. Respondents were effusive about who they considered competent staff members, and referred to them by name. Sometimes, residents were unclear about staff members' titles or positions. That seemed incidental to residents. To them, it was important to have staff members whom they felt were competent, and with whom they felt a connection. Below are comments from five interview respondents who were effusive about their development's staff:

I've had very good experiences with the service staff. In fact, I've told all three of the staff – well, there's four, counting the janitor, and he's a sweetheart, but I was going to say – I told all three of

the ladies that I think this is the best staff that we've had since I moved here. You know, they work so well together, and they're just – I feel very comfortable with all of them.

We had several people come and go. But they never offered any of those things that you mentioned. Now, we just received a new person named Bonnie, probably two months ago. And she's doing a terrific job. She's offering all these different things. She's bringing in all kinds of services to help people. I personally have not met with her, but a lot of people have, and they say she's doing to fantastic job. Before that, not so much. ... We didn't know any services were available. They pretty much just stayed in their office. Once a week, they'd have a pizza party, you'd pay for your own. And that's about it. Bonnie is out on the floor, meeting us, doing things – with the other ones, we just never even knew.

We do have a great manager and I don't know what Betty's title is. I guess she would be the person that you would go to for help. She does things for the residents. ... She is the go-to person here. Beth is the manager. She does, like, the yearly things and keeps the roles going. ... She's great. She's a great manager. She manages two or three places. I'm sure she's busy. She's only here Tuesdays and Thursdays, I think.

I used to belong to "Neighbors Helping Neighbors" with Betty Good. She had a program. We belong to the leadership program. ... (learned about the program) when (she) moved in, and Betty Good is our social worker, and she sends out notices about everything. (only joined) when Betty asked me to belong to the leadership program. They've been great – just having them available and going to Betty Good instead of trying to research everything on your own.

Yes, yeah. Now, the one we had before the present one, she was really devoted. She went the extra mile on everything, you know. She knew our name, she looked into everything people our age would like to have and whether it was recreational, or health wise. She was excellent. And then the one that is here now, she's only been here a short time, but I don't see her, you know, like walking around the lobby or where she's pretty much in her office, although she did have someone come in to give flu shots from Rite Aide. But the woman before her also did that. I mean, it's a huge help because a lot of the people here no longer have a car to drive. It's a matter to have somebody come and give the shots here, you know, it's a huge help.

This is in line with the survey findings, and also in line with what research has found about community. Relationships and connecting with people are important to many, and these residents value their development staff members – referring them to by name, and appreciating how they are often pro-active and also helpful. In fact, when asked how they felt things could be improved, one interview respondent said,

They had had some managers in here that – forget it. They were just awful.

She further suggested,

I think they should be more selective in their choice of managers, and they should give them better training. I really do. I mean, this one woman – she was manager here for three years, and she was so snotty and so nasty. In fact, she said to me one day, “You like to shop, don’t you?” Like – I like to shop – I haven’t bought any new clothes since I quit work. When we do shop, it’s usually a thrift shop or at a sale. I never buy anything full price. But who doesn’t like to say they’re going shopping and go and look in the stores and see what’s available and all that?

As discussed earlier, these older residents are aware that they no longer have many (if any) options for housing. While many expressed gratitude for the housing they currently have at an HDC development, it is also true that many constantly feel that they are being judged and watched. Whether this is the reality or not, this is the perception that some residents have. Residents are quick to respond to what they perceive as negative treatment from staff members, as witnessed by the following response:

We had a very, very bad facilities manager. Terrible. She actually was fired a month ago. She threatened us. She intimidated the workers. She intimidated people. She intimidated her co-workers. So everybody was on edge. Everybody was afraid to say something. So that person that was in that position was intimidated as well. So it was a terrible place to live, until she got fired. It was a horrible place to live. ... A lot of people wrote lots of people and calls and letters were sent and nothing was done. I feel like they just wanted somebody sitting in an office. Yeah, we were treated terrible.

One respondent talked candidly about the fear that they saw among their fellow residents, saying,

Some of the people I talk to are probably the people that are the complainers. Other people don’t say much. A lot of these people are women, like I said, and a lot of people are really scared. They worry about being evicted and don’t say anything. I worry about the same things. A lot of people are real quiet. They don’t really like me speaking up because they’re like, “Don’t rock the boat.” “Don’t rock the boat.” You’ll ruin something good, you know? ... Fear is a tool – I think they use it to kind of get some compliance. They’ve never said it. Frankly, they’ve never threatened me with it.

This respondent also acknowledged that they themselves worried about similar issues. Again, we understand that residents’ responses might not reflect reality. Regardless, whether this is the reality or not, some residents perceive that staff members look down on them and treat them negatively, and that they’re being implicitly threatened with loss of housing.

Theme #4 – Most residents’ quality of life is not directly related to living in a HDC development.

In line with the survey findings, in our interviews, most of the residents – all things considered – feel like they have a decent quality of life. Those who do not often pinpoint issues not related to the development or resident services, e.g., experiencing chronic health problems, being apart from family members etc. For instance, one resident, when asked about her quality of life and whether she liked her living situation, said,

I enjoy it here. It’s well kept. The only problem we have on a continuing basis is we have two elevators and it seems like one or the other is always breaking down. And sometimes, it might be out for a couple of months. That’s the only problem I experienced here. There’s a lot of great things. It’s like great community living. Everybody looks out for each other. We have many activities in the community center. I truly enjoy living here.

Out of 13 residents who participated in the interviews, however, five respondents described their quality of life as “lousy” or said that they no longer have a quality of life. It is important to note, though, that the rationales residents provided did not have anything to do with their living in a HDC development specifically. In only one case did a resident pinpoint their “lousy quality of life” partly to their feeling that rules are not enforced equally at their HDC development. Two residents attributed their low quality of life to illness, disability, and loss of employment, while a third resident lamented that they didn’t receive any visitors and that their days all pass by in the same way.

CONCLUSION

In our original report on the survey results, we recommended that HDC consider ways of explaining more clearly to residents what constitutes on-site resident services and how residents can utilize these programs, since a majority of respondents who answered the survey said that they were not aware of the eviction prevention program, the Hope & Opportunity Fund, the financial education services, and the resident leadership services. We continue to make this recommendation, but further suggest that HDC consider ways to “rebrand Resident Services” that would help residents maintain their identity and dignity as

an independent person. This is perhaps the key finding of this addendum report.

We pointed out in the original report, and reiterate here, that many of the residents share a keen understanding of their lack of options when it comes to housing, and many also understand some of the negative stereotypes that the general public holds towards those who live in affordable housing. Hence, finding ways to help residents maintain a sense of an independent self are important – whether it be hosting community events, having personable staff members, or providing services that require transportation and access to technology.