

NAHHP Update

Communities Bloom Thanks to Community Gardens

BY LEIGH ANN SMITH

When The Community Builders (TCB) took ownership of Leyden Woods Apartments in Greenfield, Mass. in 1996, it was in what most locals would consider bad shape. A decayed property in a community with a significant amount of drug activity, Leyden Woods was known as a housing option of last resort.

In 2012, the property had so changed that it was awarded a NAHMA Community of Quality® Award for Best Turnaround of a Troubled Property.

The improvements implemented by TCB were numerous and impressive. And property manager Diane Sargent credits not just the infrastructure improvements, but the changed attitudes of residents, to making the transformation complete.

For the new sense of camaraderie among residents, she gives much credit to the establishment of a community garden.

“When TCB took over, there were no resident services, so I took a survey to see what people wanted. One thing that was repeated over and over



again was the desire for a garden. It was completely resident driven,” said Sargent.

BENEFITS ARE MANY

Whether flower gardens, vegetable gardens or a combination of the two, community gardens at affordable housing complexes offer many benefits.

Community building. Gardening fosters a strong sense of community both onsite and with the surrounding neighborhood as gardeners/merchants can sometimes sell their produce to people living outside the apartment complex.

Beautification.

Residents take pride in greening their community.

Education.

Participants learn about recycling and developing organic food sources.

Intergenerational activity. Adults often include their children when preparing and maintaining their garden and/or garden plots.

Improved diets. Diets improve because of the availability of fresh produce.

Cost savings. Gardeners often reduce their grocery bills.

Ecological. Gardens provide food and shelter for birds and



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NATIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING
MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION
(NAHMA)—Protecting the
Interests of Affordable Housing
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insects. By bringing sustainable agriculture into cities, there is a release of pressure on rural farmlands, as well as a decrease in fossil fuels used for food transport. Efforts can even be taken a step further toward bettering our environment if rainfall is harnessed in rain barrels for irrigation, or composting systems are established.

Improved Health. In addition to nutritious food access, community gardens promote active living by encouraging residents of all ages to increase their level of physical activity. According to Kaplan research, spending time gardening in open air spaces also has the

power to improve psychological health.

Other socio-economic.

Other socio-economic benefits include community activism through empowerment, the establishment of cultural identity through the growth of ethnically specific foods and social cohesion between generations and ethnicities.

Community gardens may range in size from 100 square feet to several acres and may serve anywhere from a single gardener to more than 50. Some community gardens are designed for special populations, such as youths or seniors. Most gardens are used for growing vegetables, but others cultivate flowers or herbs. Some community gardens generate income and are considered urban agriculture.

SUCCESS AT LEYDEN WOODS

At Leyden Woods, Sargent's initial focus was on growing vegetables. The community began hosting cookouts where much of the menu contained food right from their own garden, including homemade pesto made from fresh herbs—a treat that many of the residents had never before tasted.

The garden has also allowed Leyden Woods to give out free groceries on a weekly basis. Every Thursday, residents donate fresh vegetables that they've grown in the garden and stand outside together to distribute them.

To aid in the socio-economic impact, Sargent was quick to establish a kid's garden to give

resident children a safe and productive way to stay entertained on the property.

“Of course the fact that the garden provides food is wonderful, but what has really touched me most has been the friendships that have developed,” she said. As a property that is divided into five different courts, she found that families would typically stay in their own court, which created a sense of division among the residents.

“Once we started the garden, people really started to bond with people outside their court, so it really expanded our sense of community. That's what really stands out to me as the biggest benefit.”

STEPS TO STARTING YOUR COMMUNITY GARDEN

The steps to develop a community garden are sequential, but garden sponsors may need to take them in a different order depending on circumstances in their community. This information was excerpted from the American Community Gardening Association at <http://communitygarden.org/learn/starting-a-community-garden.php>.

1. Determine Need and Interest. Experts say 10 committed gardeners is the minimum to begin an effort.

2. Organize the Planning Process. Organize a group to plan the outreach and develop the garden. Establish leadership and responsibilities.



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3. Identify Potential Partners. Find contributors for topsoil, seeds, tools, fencing, and technical assistance. Churches and city departments of parks and recreation or community development are common sources of assistance. Existing gardening groups in the community can be helpful for models, advocacy, technical assistance or partnerships.

4. Select an Appropriate Site. Find an available site that meets your needs and does not have major environmental or incompatible use problems. The site should receive at least six hours of direct sunlight daily. Water should be in place or easily accessible.

5. Prepare a Site Development Plan. Gather resources and materials. Create a tool storage space. Determine the plot sizes, access points and fencing system, if any.

6. Establish an Organization. Establish a decision-making process with assigned roles. Prepare a set of written rules and preferences on assignment of plots. Decide how income will be budgeted and spent and how rules will be enforced. Establish a periodic maintenance schedule.

7. Define Leadership. Develop an ongoing organizational structure with clearly defined leadership and program guidelines to limit potential disputes and misunderstandings.

8. Manage the Garden. All members should be given a set of written rules; these should

also be posted at the site.

Rules should cover actions to be taken if a gardener is not actively using his or her plot. If gardeners are expected to donate time to maintain or improve the site, this should be clearly communicated.

9. Encourage Community Acceptance. The site's appearance is important. A perimeter of flowers will enhance the visual impact. Pick ripe vegetables and fruit regularly. This will reduce theft.

10. Barriers to a Community Garden. Not every available piece of land is suitable or appropriate for use as a garden. Sites should be carefully considered before initiating work. Major barriers include:

- Unsuitable land due to soil contamination;
- Unavailable land;
- Insufficient number of people interested in the project;
- Neighborhood opposition; and
- Inaccessible water.

11. Budgeting for a Typical Garden Project. Community gardens are not created without expense. The initial costs of developing a site can run into thousands of dollars. Ongoing maintenance costs, by contrast, are modest.

Before undertaking a garden project, residents and property managers should have a clear idea of funding and labor sources. It's hard but fun work, and, as Leyden Woods discovered, the benefits bloom like a squash blossom. **NU**

Leigh Ann Smith is a staff writer for Community-Based Communications, LLC, of Cheverly, Md.

URGENT GRASSROOTS ISSUE

Project-Based Section 8 FY 2013 Funding

HUD requested serious cuts and a return to partial funding for Project-based Section 8 contracts in its FY 2013 budget. Under this proposal, two-thirds of HUD's Project-based Section 8 contracts would receive nine months' funding or less for their housing assistance payments (HAP) contracts, depending on which month those contracts renew in 2013.

Senate bill (S) 2322 is the FY 2013 Transportation-HUD

\$8.7 billion for the Project-based Section 8 funding.

NAHMA strongly opposes cutting funding for the Project-based Section 8 program or short-funding the contracts at any level that provides less than full funding for all 12-month contract renewals.

A CALL TO ACTION

NAHMA strongly opposes cuts to the Project-based Section 8 contract renewal funds, and HUD's proposed budget gimmick of "short-funding"

discuss these important issues with your Representatives, NAHMA has created several resources such as talking points, phone scripts, and model letters. Links to those sources are available below. NAHMA requests that you and your colleagues share this information via email or phone call with your Congressional Representatives and their staff.

Please also invite Members of Congress and their staff to your properties to see the pos-

THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE provided less than what is necessary to fully-fund Project-based Section 8 contract renewals for their 12-month terms in House Resolution (HR) 5972, the House's FY 2013 Transportation-HUD Appropriations Bill.

Appropriations bill. It would provide full funding for the Project-based Section 8 program at \$9.875 billion, with \$9.6 billion set aside for contract renewals. The bill passed the Senate Appropriations Committee with strong bipartisan support.

However, the House Appropriations Committee provided *less than what is necessary to fully-fund Project-based Section 8 contract renewals for their 12-month terms* in House Resolution (HR) 5972, the House's FY 2013 Transportation-HUD Appropriations Bill. HR 5972 includes HUD's FY 2013 budget request of

HAP contracts for less than their full 12-month terms. In order to ensure full funding of the Project-based Section 8 program in FY 2012, we strongly encourage NAHMA members and other supporters of affordable multifamily housing to contact their Congressional Representatives and support funding the Project-based Section 8 program at \$9.875 billion, the funding level provided by the S 2322, the Senate's FY 2013 Transportation-HUD Appropriations bill, as passed by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

To help you contact and

itive impact of the Project-based Section 8 program when they are in their Districts/States.

NAHMA has phone scripts, sample letters and talking points to use when discussing this important issue with your Congressional Representative and Senators. To access these, go to NAHMA's Grassroots Action Center at http://nahma.org/content/grassroots_PBS8.html.

Also contact NAHMA staff members Lauren Eardensohn (lauren@nahma.org) or Michelle Kitchen (michelle.kitchen@nahma.org) if you have any questions. **NU**

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Answers From Your Peers

Hiring the Right Person

Q: How can I hire good people and reduce turnover of my staff?

A: This is one of the most important aspects of property management, and one of the most confusing for property managers who may not have a human resources (HR) staff or even a dedicated HR person. In smaller organizations, sometimes only one or two people handle everything.

But poor hiring practices and disorganized or inconsistent staff management can cost money, time and tenants. The following tips can help ensure that your human resources department runs as smoothly as the rest of your organization.

PUTTING TOGETHER THE RIGHT STAFF

It's important to have your company's roles mapped out. Don't just hire people because you're overwhelmed with work. Have job descriptions written and updated regularly. That way, when you hire you know exactly the qualities and skill sets needed to perform the tasks that have been identified.

FINDING CANDIDATES

Finding candidates on your own (i.e., not using a recruiting firm or headhunter) usually means you need to advertise

the position. Advertising now encompasses multiple media, such as the Internet, general newspapers, job ad newspapers, professional publications, window advertisements, job centers, and campus graduate recruitment programs. It can also involve recruitment research, which is the proactive identification of passive candidates who are happy in their current positions and are not actively looking to move companies.

SELECTING THE IDEAL CANDIDATE

Because almost all of the jobs on a site require interaction with residents, vendors, other managers, and sometimes regulators, it's important that all staff have excellent interpersonal skills. Much can be learned about this during the interview process. Does the candidate make eye contact with you? Do they answer questions readily? Are they comfortable with the interview process? Holding multiple interviews for any position can be a good idea. That way you have a really good idea who the applicant is. Suitability for a job is typically assessed by looking for skills that are represented on a resume, plus the testimony of references and in-house testing, such as for software knowledge or literacy. When screening resumes, look for length of

service, job titles and length of time at a job.

If you have the resources to do so and fitting into the corporate culture is important enough, you might want to consider psychological assessment tools. These can be easily found on the Internet.

HANDLING DIFFICULT STAFF MEMBERS

It's a really good idea to plan for and follow formal procedures, including having an employee handbook that is given at the start or even before the employee is hired. Included with the employee handbook should be a list of standards of operations, or policies and procedures. These standards will outline employee issues, proper use of office computers, job descriptions, office procedures, how to lease a property, forms and different business functions.

Using these formal procedures—specifically, keeping individual written accounts—is one of the best ways to handle insubordination. Start with a verbal warning, and document the incident. If the issue persists, continue to write up the staff member based on company policy. Prior to the final potential write up, consider notifying the staff member that an additional write-up will result in termination.

Insubordination is often the result of a lack of guidance, which can only intensify an employee's frustration further. It's important, therefore, that a staff member understands what he or she did wrong and how it can be corrected. Clear, concise expectations help avoid misunderstandings.

ENSURE EFFECTIVE TRAINING OF NEW HIRES

For property managers and senior-level employees, it may be important to review contracts, laws and standard procedures, and provide on-the-job training on an as-needed basis. Refresher sessions are often in order. As a new employee acclimates to the site, encourage him or her to ask questions and request feedback, including from co-workers. You might also have employees evaluate their own work upon completion of tasks, so that they can tell you the challenges they faced, where they exceeded their own expectations and what can be done differently next time around.

Although each property manager's human resources needs may be different, practicing these essentials can make both staffing decisions and the day-to-day aspects of the job much easier. **NU**



A Philosophy of Doing the Right Thing

NAHP: Ronald Budynas, NAHP-e, SHCM

MANAGEMENT COMPANY: Wesley Housing Corp. of Memphis, Inc.

POSITION: Director of Housing and Home Services

YEAR OF CERTIFICATION: 2006

In 1995, Ron Budynas happened upon his career in affordable housing after spending 20 years in the U.S. Marine Corps. With a plan to retire, get a part-time job and go back to school, he headed to the retiree transition center on base without a clear idea about what he might do next.

What he found was a job with Associated Realty Ser-

vices Inc., where he supervised employees and made sure that contracts were done correctly—a perfect transition from his role overseeing airport construction in the Marine Corps. He stayed with the company for seven years.

In 2004, he heard about an opening at the Wesley Housing Corporation of Memphis and, with a strong desire to work with the elderly, decided to apply. He landed a job as the regional asset manager and eventually advanced to the position of director of housing and home services, which he still holds today.

Budynas believes strongly in keeping himself and his employees up-to-date on current issues within the afford-

able housing market. “We take every opportunity to mix both formal and self-education,” he said. This means earning NAHMA certifications, attending SAHMA conferences and classes, reading manuals and articles, reading for professional development and taking advantage of on-the-job training. Budynas attributes his success in affordable housing to remembering why it is he does his job.

“We’re in the housing business, not the un-housing business, so I don’t really believe in evictions. Of course that’s something we have to face on occasion, but we won’t do it until we’ve gone through every other option with resi-

dents,” Budynas said. He has a similar attitude about his employees. “I don’t believe in micromanagement. I believe in my employees. My greatest advice to them, and to other managers, is to learn the philosophy of your company and make sure that any decisions you make embrace that philosophy. If you do the right thing, you can’t go wrong.”

Budynas believes that his most important role is to serve his residents. “We’re in a support role,” he said. “We’re here to house them and take care of them in their final years, and we are going to take care of them in the way that we hope someone will take care of each of us when that time comes.” **NU**

PROTECTING THE INTERESTS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROPERTY MANAGERS AND OWNERS

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