

How has the structure and operation of the SLHA changed from when Pruitt-Igoe first opened to after the rent strike to now?

The way operating expenses in public housing are funded has completely changed. In 1959, Congress gave local housing authorities the power to set rents. However, as housing authorities raised rents in response to rising costs, thousands of public-housing residents found themselves paying more than half their income in rent. Pressure from advocates about the high cost of public housing rents led to the passage of the Brooke Amendment. The Brooke Amendment, passed in 1969, amended the Housing Act to set the maximum rent at 25 percent of the tenant's income, with a minimum rent of 10 percent of income added in 1974. In 1981, the Reagan administration set rent at 30 percent of income for all tenants.

In 1972, Congress began providing operating subsidy to housing authorities to pay the cost of operating expenses that revenue from rent did not cover. Although there have been many changes over the years about how the subsidy is calculated, today the same basic formula applies. Residents pay 30% of their income as rent and HUD provides operating subsidy to ensure the housing authority has enough funding to operate the units. However, currently Congress has made significant cuts to the operating subsidies making it difficult for housing authorities to adequately maintain their housing stock.

What were the largest problems you faced when you first became executive director of the SLHA?

HUD has a rating system for public housing authorities that measures basic business indicators that give HUD an understanding of how a housing authority is operating. When I became the executive director, the score was 14 out of 100. Today the score is 88 out of 100. With a score of 14, the housing authority had major problems in just about every aspect of its operation. The largest problems were the condition of the housing stock and the financial condition of the agency.

What do you think are some of the qualities that a housing authority must have in order to be successful?

To be successful, a housing authority must first be an ethical organization. Next, the organization must also focus on its mission of housing people. Another important quality is the agency operating using basic business principles.

Do you still have problems with vandalism in public housing, and how does it compare to private market housing around the city?

We still have some problems with vandalism, but I don't think our problems are any greater than private rental property in the same neighborhoods.

Has Pruitt-Igoe's failure overshadowed the successes of the SLHA?

Not really. Pruitt-Igoe has been gone for almost 40 years. Although there are a fair number of people still fascinated with its story, I do not think it overshadows what we have done lately.

What are the vacancy rates in Public Housing now, as compared to at the time of Pruitt-Igoe?

We don't have good data on the vacancy rates at the time of Pruitt-Igoe. However, anecdotally I understand that when Pruitt-Igoe began to decline the vacancy rate was extremely high, as much as 20% - 30%. Today our vacancy rate is less than 2%, which is well below the industry standard.

What types of public housing do you have now in St. Louis?

Most of our units for families are town house or garden style units.

Why do you think Pruitt-Igoe failed?

Pruitt-Igoe experienced the "perfect storm" of social and economic change that led to its failure. First, as the buildings aged, the rental revenue was not sufficient to pay for operating expenses, particularly maintenance issues. As the building declined, they became a less desirable place to live, increasing the vacancy, which lowered the revenue, which led to more deterioration of the condition of the building. In addition, to these economic issues there were significant changes occurring in social policy, particularly welfare policy. These changes led to the weakening of the family structure, as it provided disincentives for fathers to reside with the family. This weakening of the family structure led to more troubled youth, which ultimately led to higher crime rates.

Finally, the last element of the "perfect storm" was the structure of the building themselves. Federal housing policy tends to take a model that works in some other market (usually on the east coast) and replicate the model across the country. A model that works in New York City will not necessarily work in a mid-west city. Unfortunately, this approach is still used today to set federal policy.

Do you think that Pruitt-Igoe could have been saved?

It is hard to say. Today, we do not build high-rise buildings for family and we have torn down all the family high-rise buildings we once had except for one. The last remaining family high-rise is scheduled to be demolished in 2014. Therefore, it is safe to say if Pruitt-Igoe had survived the 1970's it would likely still not be around today.

Is there a stigma that comes with being a public housing resident?

There certainly is a public housing resident stereotype that is completely untrue. The stereotype is that public housing residents are single mothers on welfare with five or more children. In fact, the average family size in public housing is 2.2 people, 26.3% of the families receive their income from employment. The next most common sources of income are Social Security and SSI. Less than 8% of our families receive TANF (welfare). So, our residents are working mothers with one or two children, elderly people and people with disabilities.

About what percent of public housing tenants become able to move out to private market housing?

We don't keep these exact statistics. About 20% of our residents move out of public housing each year for a variety of reasons. Many of them do not tell us why they are moving. Of those who do move, 5% say they are going to buy a house or move to a different part of town.