



With DCTA, West Memphis, Arkansas Can See a Path Toward Redevelopment of Vacant Properties

With technical assistance from Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), West Memphis, AR, has received training and capacity building support to develop a land bank strategy that addresses their affordable housing needs. West Memphis requested and received technical assistance (TA) through the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Distressed Cities and Persistent Poverty Technical Assistance (DCTA) Program.

To learn more about the DCTA Program, visit https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/comm_planning/cpdata/dcta.

The City of West Memphis requested direct technical assistance for establishing a land bank strategy, including capacity building for vacant property acquisition and rehabilitation, affordable housing development and financing, and community engagement. With this assignment in mind, LISC began with an assessment of the land bank opportunities and activities as well as development capacity in the region. Land banks can have a variety of structures, and it was important for the city to gain insight into the various options and the resources and capacity needed to launch a land bank.

West Memphis is located in east Arkansas, one hour south of Little Rock and directly across the Mississippi River from Memphis, Tennessee. There are three bridge crossings from Memphis to West Memphis – two are for vehicle traffic and one is for pedestrian, bicycle, and train traffic. West Memphis has a population of approximately 25,000 people. The city's poverty rate is 25.3 percent. About 24 percent of families and 28 percent of the city's residents live below the federal poverty line. Rental rates are high, and homeownership remains elusive. Many people who can afford the homeownership option decide to live in adjoining cities, leaving more economically vulnerable populations who cannot achieve homeownership behind. A significant portion of the residential neighborhoods adjacent to the southeast commercial corridor have become blighted, exacerbating the cycle of homeowners looking for quality housing in only certain sectors of the city or in nearby cities.



Despite this, West Memphis has characteristics that can make it attractive to economic activity and people seeking affordable housing. A number of industries and companies are in West Memphis; some have a long history in the city and some are more recent



additions. In the last few years, Coca Cola has opened a plant, as has Carvana, the internet car sales company. The city is home to Southland Casino, a large casino and greyhound dog track, which attracts 4 million plus visitors a year. The casino is adding a

300-room hotel and expanding its property to accommodate more visitors. The city also has a marine port, an airport, and has the third largest rail facility in the United States. Transportation and trade are major employers, but more recently the economy has been diversifying as professional services and management jobs are growing. Health Care is another major employer for the city.

Additional assets and attractions include the newly renovated Civic Complex, Big River Trail and Big River Crossing, the renewal of public transportation, various Delta Heritage attractions such as stock car racing at Riverside Speedway, which is a vintage, dirt-track speedway on the National Register of Historic Places. With this growing economy, West Memphis needs create more homeownership opportunities.

The City of West Memphis identified the Southeast as the primary area in which a proposed land bank could boost these opportunities. The city expressed a desire to use a land bank to purchase, assemble, and sell residential property for new single, and possibly duplex, housing for market rate and affordable homeownership in the Southeast. The Southeast has experienced major disinvestment over the decades and there are now many empty lots and some vacant homes. Disbursed among vacancies are some stable and some deteriorated, but habitable homeowner occupied and rental housing.



Although many challenges exist in the Southeast area, many assets and opportunities are also present. Residents and families have lived in the neighborhood for generations and a network of churches, other community anchors and informal leaders provide a solid foundation. A new elementary school was recently completed by the city, and a



new middle school is in the planning stages. The main street, Broadway, is undergoing streetscape improvements and other revitalization. There is great demand for new and code compliant existing housing. The area is ripe for planned new development including housing, small businesses, and other amenities. Southeast is the part of the city closest to Memphis that has trails and newly designated parkland for jogging, biking, and other

recreational uses. City leaders acknowledge the need to build new infrastructure including streets and sewers.

The land bank capacity assessment focused on how prepared the city was to take affirmative steps to create a land bank, what resources they had to carry the work out,

how they planned to engage community members, and where the potential resources were to implement a land bank. TA team conducted many interviews with local stakeholders, as well as area and regional businesses to develop an understanding of capacity in the region. The assessment included an environmental scan of land banks and developers and engaged the city in conversations about the benefits of community engagement to involve businesses and residents in the planning.



As a result of the land bank capacity assessment, the city has a much greater understanding of the distinct options and priorities for land bank development activities. City staff, City Council members, and community stakeholders received intensive training on the various types of land bank models, along with budgeting and staffing implications of the different models. The TA team provided suggestions about ways to think through prioritization of development activities and provided training on community

engagement best practices. This work led to the more specific assistance helping the city jump start the development activity in the Southeast quadrant of the city.

With the help of the TA team, including templates and guidance for program design, the city recently issued a Request for Proposals to the development community. Responses have been received, which is exciting and encouraging for the city. The TA team connected the city with two out of town affordable housing developers with extensive knowledge of affordable housing programming at the Arkansas Development Finance Agency (ADFA). The TA team connected the city with the HOME Investment Partnership team at ADFA to discuss the city's affordable housing development goals and learn more about the State's HOME program. That call resulted in the State's offer to partner with West Memphis as they pursue their housing rehabilitation and homeownership goals by submitting plans to the HOME program.

The City of West Memphis now has a basic land banking strategy, and further technical assistance will help the city create a more robust plan by developing a roadmap for the city to upgrade the sophistication of their approach as their capacity and resources allow. With new knowledge, new partnerships, new templates, and new ways to engage its citizens, West Memphis can see a path to revitalizing and developing affordable housing in the southeastern quadrant of the city.

