



Resident Council and Housing Authority Case Study

Charleston-Kanawha, WV

Resident Councils Partner for Impact



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This document is part of the **Public Housing Resident Organizing and Participation Toolkit**. The full toolkit includes topical guides, customizable resident council documents and forms, tools related to tenant participation funds, and case studies of resident organizations around the country. To see the full toolkit go to: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/public-housing/resident-toolkit/>

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Charleston-Kanawha, WV: Resident Councils Partner for Impact

Virginia Nesmith, President of the Orchard Manor Resident Council in Charleston, WV, was brought into the resident council by her neighbors when she first moved to the property.

“They were planning how to get the neighborhood in a good situation.” Ms. Nesmith is now the person who brings others in and gets things done for her community. The Charleston-Kanawha Housing Authority Chief Executive Officer, Mark Taylor, explains, “she calls me to tell me something’s happening.”



Resident Council Structure

The Charleston-Kanawha Housing Authority (CKHA) in West Virginia has six family communities and four high-rise senior properties and scattered sites throughout the City of Charleston that provide 1,148 units of public housing.

The CKHA encourages and supports resident councils at their public housing properties. Currently, there are about 6 active resident councils, including one at each of the senior high-rises. Each of the resident councils has bylaws which they created with the support of Legal Aid around 2001, with some updates since then.

The resident councils meet monthly on their own. The management team also has a monthly meeting at each property that residents attend to bring up any issues. Security is the most common issue at these meetings. This includes issues with cameras and lighting that is down or needs to be added, doors that need to be secured, and unauthorized access. If residents do not feel that their issues have been addressed at the management meeting, the resident council representatives will bring it up at their quarterly, jurisdiction-wide, meeting with the CKHA director.



JURISDICTION-WIDE RESIDENT COUNCIL



Orchard Manor Resident Council

Orchard Manor is a public housing family development with 200 families, including seniors, in Charleston. The resident council has five Board members—a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and parliamentarian. The resident council holds elections every three years, though most of the other resident councils hold annual elections. In the case of Orchard Manor, if they lose someone from the Board between elections, the Board appoints a resident to serve until the next election. Their council does not have term limits but some of the high-rise resident councils do.

The Orchard Manor Resident Council has an advisory board made up of people that do not live at the property. Ms. Nesmith, the president of the resident council, explains that these are “neighbors who bring good ideas and things. They help with the food giveaway program.” The council also benefits from the support of former residents. For example, one former resident has a connection with a dairy and brings donations of milk and other foods for the residents.

The Orchard Manor Resident Council generally meets monthly. In their meetings, they work to decide on the best things to do for the neighborhood. They encourage residents to talk to each other and be friendly and they work to support the young people at the property.

The Orchard Manor Resident Council works to engage everyone at the property by having programs that are geared towards different communities. A successful intergenerational program that the resident council started is the Read to Me program where seniors read to the children. To draw residents to their meetings, the council often brings in guests. The police are the most popular since public safety is often top of mind for residents.



Orchard Manor Community Garden. Photo credit: Charleston-Kanawha Housing Authority



Resident Council – Housing Authority Partnership

Resident Council representatives meet quarterly with the Housing Authority’s Chief Executive Officer for a business lunch. This group functions as the jurisdiction-wide resident council but is open to residents who live at sites that do not have a resident council. At the business lunch they discuss what is working and any issues that need to be addressed by management. The Chief Executive Officer, Mark Taylor, explains that he is there to “listen to their complaints and comments... They make us aware of security concerns such as drug issues, unauthorized visitors, people coming through the doors.”

Ms. Nesmith, from Orchard Manor, explains that these meetings are an opportunity to gather information on what the other communities are doing, especially given that the needs and issues are often the same. The meetings offer a chance to talk through how resident councils are enhancing the quality of life in their communities. All the resident councils do activities for holidays and can share their ideas. Resident council representatives have a chance to brag about their accomplishments and activities. Resident Councils often compete with each other, in good spirit, when it comes to their fundraisers, the primary one being hot dog sales.

The resident councils and housing authority often work together on policy issues. For example, thinking through how to implement and educate residents around the no smoking policy. The Chief Executive Officer, Mark Taylor, states that he believes it is critical for the housing authority to work closely with the resident council to build trust. He explains that this can be done over time by working on relatively small issues, like the smoking policy and other quality of life issues, so that there is trust when there are big issues like rehabbing the properties. Mr. Taylor explains that during previous modernizations, particularly demolitions that occurred under HOPE VI, there was a lot of distrust between residents and the housing authority. In order to have the best outcomes, he works to repair those relationships and engage residents.



Resident Advisory Board and the Annual Plan

A Resident Advisory Board (RAB) is a group, or multiple groups, of residents that advises and assists the housing authority in creating Annual and 5-Year Plans, often referred to together as “the Plan.”

The Plan is a comprehensive guide to the agency’s policies, rules, programs, operations, and strategies to meet its goals. Resident involvement in developing the Plan is critical since it outlines policies and programs directly impacting residents. The housing authority must consider the recommendations of the RAB(s) and revise the Plan where appropriate. When there is a duly recognized jurisdiction-wide resident council that group serves as the RAB.



See [Guide 5: Resident Advisory Boards and the Housing Authority Plan Process](#) in this Toolkit.

In creating the Annual and 5-year Plans, CKHA staff has a public meeting at each of the properties. The agency also holds two public meetings at their primary office. The jurisdiction-wide group of resident council representatives acts as the Resident Advisory Board.

The issues that are most pertinent to residents vary each year but security is always a relevant concern. At the family sites, the housing authority and resident councils discuss proposed activities to ensure that these are the most relevant to the community, for example they implemented an afterschool program to serve family sites.

At these meetings, Resident Councils will also share their annual “want list.” The ED reports that this is generally reasonable, and accepted by the CKHA. It often includes things like furniture for the community rooms. The list also includes their needs for the gardens at three of the properties. Three of the sites have flower gardens, while three of the sites have community gardens.



Tenant Participation Funds

CKHA resident councils approve a budget on an annual basis. At that meeting they record the agenda, who participated in the meeting, the date, and proposed expenses. The resident council can also go to the Housing Authority throughout the year with a request for additional expenses.

In the past, there were difficulties with collecting receipts for resident council expenses. As a solution, the housing authority now provides money for specific expenses or makes the purchase directly for the resident council. This cuts down on issues identified during the annual audit of the resident council funds.

At this time, resident council board members do not receive stipends though this is permitted under HUD regulations and the CKHA is open to the idea.

Resident councils also do their own fundraising throughout the year. Since the tenant participation fund policy with CKHA does not allow for those funds to be used for refreshments, councils use their own money. Fundraisers include events such as hot dog sales and revenue from the vending machines. Resident councils contract with vending machine companies who supply machines that sell drinks and snacks in their buildings. The resident council can then keep the money that is earned.



Community Partnerships

Ms. Nesmith, the President of the Orchard Manor Resident Council, explains that partnering with community organizations, including churches, is critical to bring needed services and programs to the public housing properties. The CKHA supports resident councils in bringing social services to the properties but often resident councils already have a connection with a group. Community groups support the resident councils in ongoing programs and by holding annual events including coat and book giveaways.

Annual events at the communities include:

- **Voter registration clinics**
- **Thanksgiving Day dinners:** As a member of the CKHA Board of Commissioners, Ms. Nesmith invites other Commissioners to volunteer so that they can serve food and engage with the community.
- **United Way Day of Caring:** Resident Councils decide on what volunteer support they could use. Past projects have included washing gazebos, weeding, painting fences, fixing up the dumpster area, or doing crafts with families.
- **National Night Out (on Crime) in August:** Resident councils will often compete to see who can have the best activities including block parties, and police helicopters and vehicles that kids (and adults) can check out.



Food Pantry

Ms. Nesmith has now lived at Orchard Manor for thirty years. As she became a leader in her resident council she began to meet other community leaders. She explains that she considers herself an organizer and works to create and maintain relationships with people who can help her community. One such person was the director of a local mobile food pantry. Together Ms. Nesmith and the pantry director brought the food pantry to Orchard Manor. The Orchard Manor Resident Council runs the food distribution program, which is provided through the Feeding America Program and the Mountaineer Food Bank. The pantry serves food to over 50 people Monday, Wednesday, and Friday each week. It has a small space in the Switzer Community Center, which is located at Orchard Manor, but when it's nice weather the group provides food from the community garden. The program primarily serves residents at Orchard Manor but Ms. Nesmith also contacts people at other public housing developments to share.

Ms. Nesmith explains that running the mobile food pantry is a perfect place to be as the President of the Resident Council, "You meet more people with food and hear things residents like and need," including what activities the residents would like to do. The food pantry offers a great opportunity for her to connect with the families at the property and understand their interests and concerns.



Health Programs

During the COVID19 health emergency, the resident councils and CKHA partnered to bring testing, vaccines, and other health support to the public housing communities. At Orchard Manor, the resident council held a Family Fun and Photo Day with a mix of community services and fun events including a COVID19 vaccination clinic, hot dog cookout, blood pressure and glucose screenings, field day games, and family photos. The event was cosponsored by the CKHA, a local church, and a community health clinic.



Community Gardens

Resident councils at three of the family, public housing communities partner with Recovery Point Charleston, a long-term residential recovery program, to fix up and maintain their gardens. This partnership creates a meaningful volunteer opportunity for the women in the recovery program, brings people together, and creates a beautiful community space at the properties. While there are some flowers, the gardens primarily grow vegetables. The gardens are made of concrete, raised-beds, and include trellises. Recovery Point Charleston also organizes a Halloween event in the gardens. Ms. Nesmith explains how activities like this can engage community members. She recalls that when CKHA initially partnered with the West Virginia University Extension gardening program, in 2005, she decided to get involved with the resident council. She says, "They helped develop a beautiful garden and that's how I was interested and became involved."



Partnering with Elected Officials

Ms. Nesmith explains that it is important to have relationships with elected officials. For example, when the area had a blackout after a storm her streetlight did not come back on. Ms. Nesmith knew a city official she could call to get the issue fixed. Then, when it came time for the National Night out, she invited that official in appreciation of their work. Similarly, when the streets in her 40-acre community were cracked after winter, Ms. Nesmith invited a city councilmember to tour the property. After seeing the streets firsthand, the official made sure the streets were promptly paved.



Ms. Nesmith explains that partnering with community organizations “broadens your abilities” and that it is equally important to connect with elected officials, “you always need somebody when you want something done.”



Resources

Charleston-Kanawha Housing Authority: <https://ckha.com/>

Feeding America. Feeding America works to get nourishing food—from farmers, manufacturers, and retailers—to people in need: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/>

Recovery Point Charleston is a long-term women’s addiction recovery program in West Virginia: <https://recoverypointwv.org/locations/charleston/>

Interviewees

Mark Taylor, Chief Executive Officer, Charleston-Kanawha Housing Authority

Virginia Nesmith, President, Orchard Manor Resident Council