



Resident Council and Housing Authority Case Study

Chicago, IL

A History of Resident Organizing



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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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Chicago, IL: A History of Resident Organizing!

“My participation is I try to do the best that I can for the seniors on the north side... You meet with the seniors, let them know what they can do, can’t do, give them an understanding of their community, how they can participate, who represents them, and why they represent them.

Me being a senior, it’s something that I have to do.”

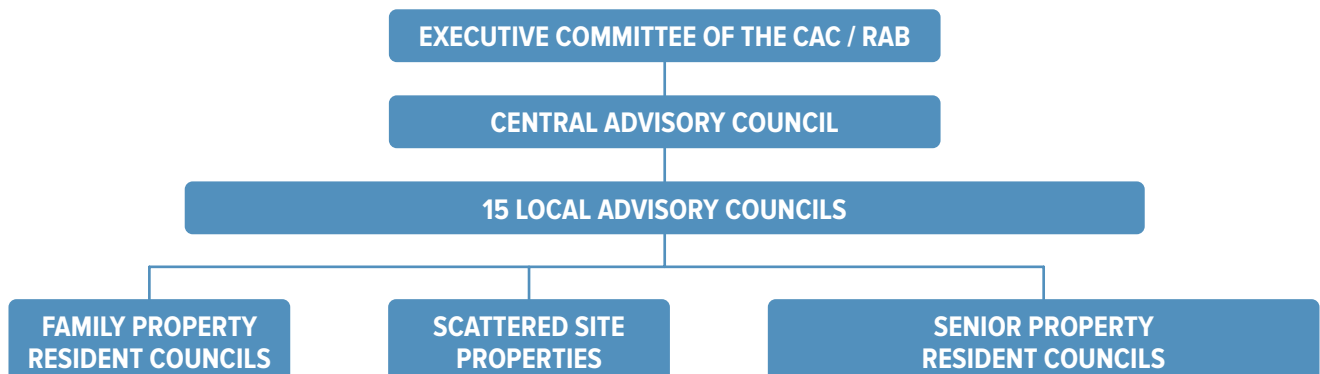
*— Robert Scott, Senior North Representative
to the Central Advisory Council*



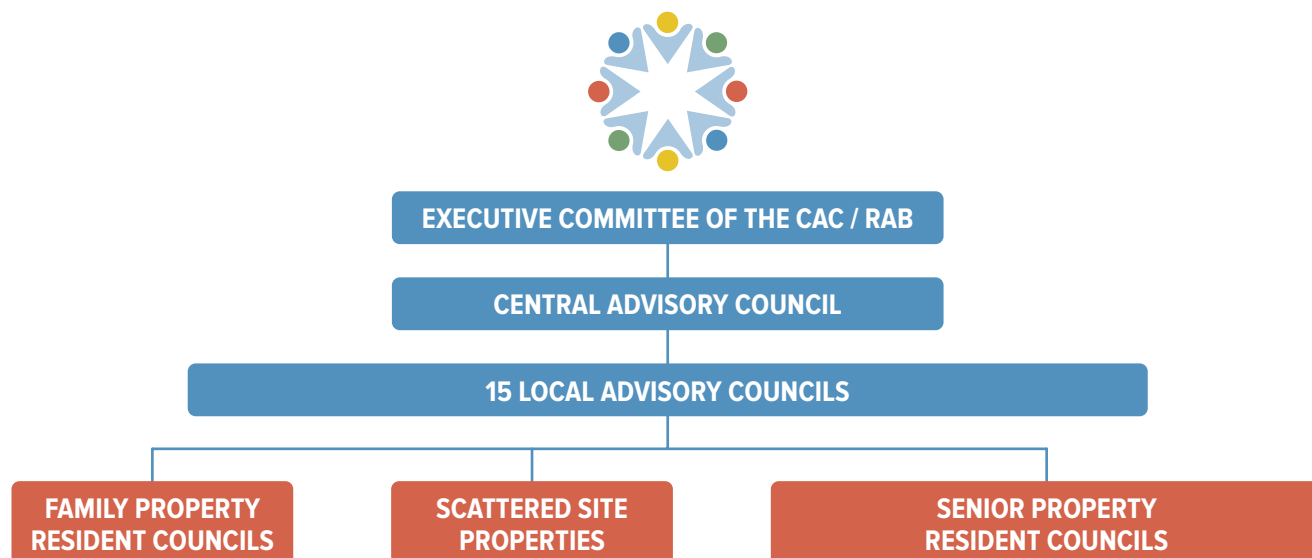
Resident Council Structure

Chicago, the 3rd largest housing authority in the country, has a very active and layered resident council structure. Every property has a building council. These building councils follow HUD guidelines as duly elected resident councils with elections every 3 years. Every community has an election for the Board of Directors positions—President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer—and a Representative to the Local Advisory Council (LAC).

There are 15 Local Advisory Councils—3 are made up of the 53 senior properties (Southside, Central Chicago, and Northside Local Advisory Councils), 2 represent scattered sites, and the remaining 10 represent the family properties. The 15 Presidents of each LAC make up the Central Advisory Council (CAC).



Members of the Central Advisory Council are very active. They attend building meetings, the LAC meetings, two Central Advisory Council meetings, and committee meetings each month. Members of the CAC Executive Committee have an additional monthly meeting.

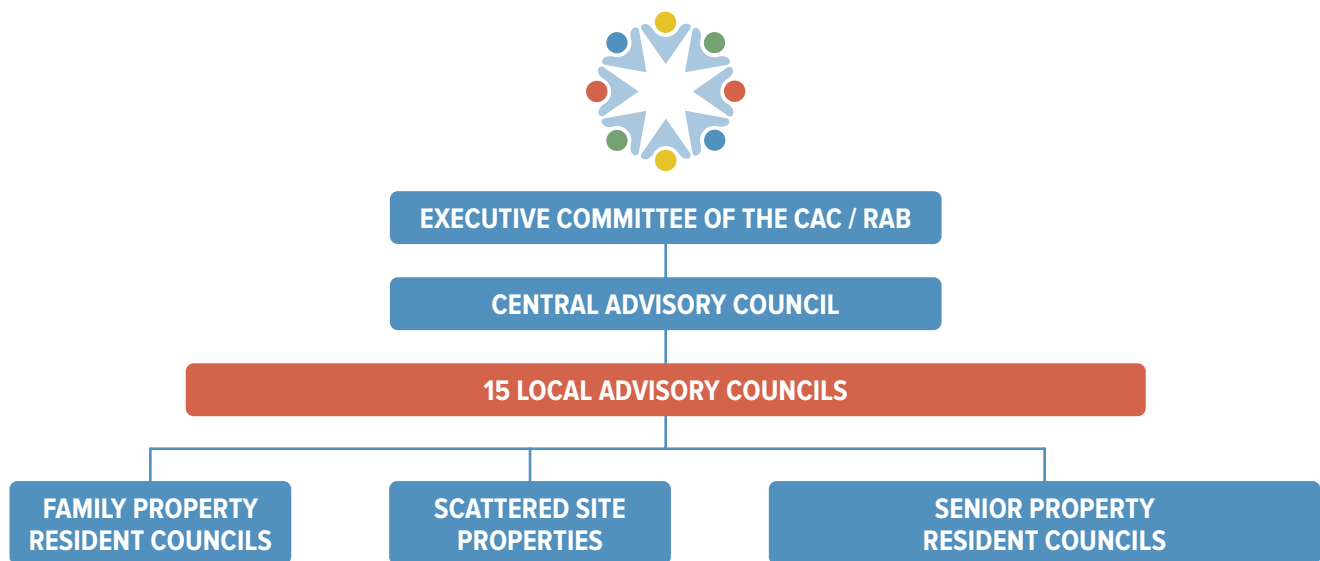


Resident Councils

The building councils are active at the property level. They meet monthly and report back to the LAC, CAC, and the housing authority. Resident councils tend to focus on issues directly related to the properties—conditions in the apartments, security, and property management. They also engage with the social services agencies that are at the traditional, public housing properties.

Resident services programs often work closely with the building councils. The staff ensures that the councils have the information to tell residents about services and how to take advantage of them. This is part of a strategy of ensuring that people are getting the same information from various sources. Resident services staff explains that the council representatives, “can see a family that may need certain things and they can give them advice” for example how to find daycare for a child or where there are job openings.

When the CHA Resident Services department was deciding how to implement the Smoke Free policy, they worked with resident councils to figure out how to best roll out the program, what education and messaging was needed, and what the consequences would be for infractions to the policy. As a result, they decided not to have a one size fits all response to infractions. Residents who committed a 2nd or 3rd infraction were given options such as watching a smoking cessation video or attending a smoking cessation program.



Local Advisory Councils

There are a total of 15 local advisory councils—3 are made up of the 53 senior properties (Southside, Central Chicago, and Northside Local Advisory Councils) and the rest representing family and scattered site properties. Each has its own office. Within each LAC members elect a President who serves on the Central Advisory Council. CHA staff assist each of the LACs with outreach.

The Local Advisory Councils meet monthly and the Board has an additional monthly meeting. The LAC may have other meetings with management or Resident Services. For example, if there is a new program, Resident Services will present on it at a LAC meeting. The LACs also engage residents in activities and ensure that residents know about the services that the housing authority offers.

Robert Scott is the President of the Senior North Local Advisory Council. He represents the 23 buildings in his LAC at the Central Advisory Council. Mr. Scott got involved with resident councils when he moved to senior public housing 11 years ago. His first leadership position was as the Vice President to the Local Advisory Council. He then ran and was elected as the President of the LAC—making him a member of the Central Advisory Council. In addition to serving as the President of the Senior North LAC, Mr. Scott serves as the Treasurer of the Central Advisory Council.

The Senior North LAC meets the 3rd Thursday of every month for 3-4 hours. As part of the Local Advisory Council, Mr. Scott discusses with other members what is happening in each building and what he can do to help. He distributes the vending machine funds back to each building as well as the annual tenant participation funds. Mr. Scott reports that he is currently working with local car dealers to procure an accessible minibus that the LAC can use to keep Northside seniors engaged.

Robert Scott describes a recent success where he and other resident leaders got seniors and residents in family housing together to do a “clean and green” to clean the neighborhoods. CHA sponsored the event and participated. He explains, “We are working so that twice a month we do the Clean and Green and students who need community service to graduate can participate.”

CHA staff report that the LAC is able to do a lot for the residents. Resident leaders have protested, marched, and even brought lawsuits for quality-of-life issues in the past. In short, as Lucas Fopma, the Deputy Chief of Resident Services explains, “They have a history of influence” within the city and with the CHA. Residents in Chicago continue to be active because they have seen that they can make a positive difference in their communities. Further, over the years, this influence has led to significant CHA staff support to the resident councils. This staff support in turn supports strong resident councils and a partnership between the CHA and the councils. As with other resident organizations, the CHA notes that the level of activity and influence of the LAC often depends on the strength of the President.

Local Advisory Councils have been very active in the redevelopment of Chicago public housing. They have working groups with developers and service providers. They ensure that residents’ right to return is respected, including keeping track of residents and relocation offers.

Resident Council Elections

All Chicago public housing properties hold building council and local advisory council elections every 3 years at the same time. An elections committee made up of someone from CHA Resident Services, Willie Lewis as the advisor, staff from CHA, and an attorney from the housing authority oversee the process. The CHA pays for the elections and generally contracts out the management of the elections through a request for proposals. The management office is not present for elections but confirms that the nominated residents are lease compliant.

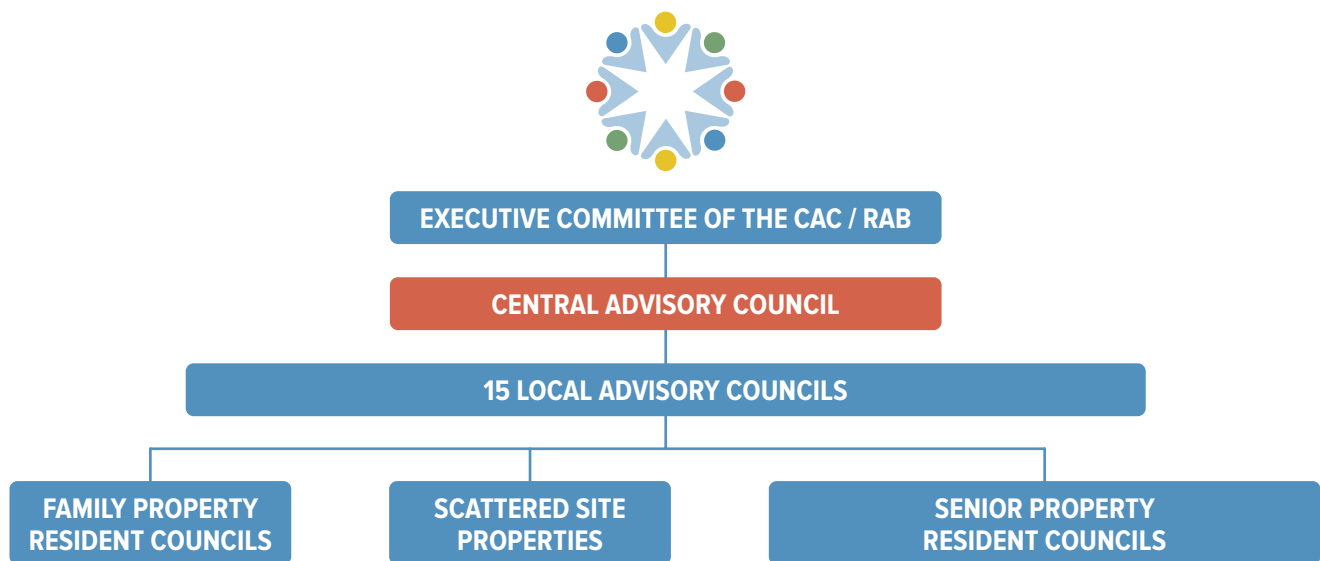
Elections currently take place through a secret ballot but the CAC plans to have actual election machines for the next election. Elections are held in June or July with results announced within a couple of weeks. New members are sworn in through a ceremony in November, and take office in January.

Residents campaign for positions and must get signatures from at least 10% of the people they will represent to be on the ballot. In the case of Mr. Scott, he represents 5,500 seniors so he needs 550 signatures. But he says he usually gets over 2,000 signatures. He is able to get this level of support because he visits all 23 of the buildings he represents each month and many of the residents know him. When he meets new residents, he passes out his business cards. The Senior Monitors provide support by passing out the petitions. Petitions can also be posted on the bulletin board. Once elected, the term is 3 years. There is no limit to the number of terms a resident can serve.



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Central Advisory Council

The Central Advisory Council was started in 1974 to bring together representatives of all of Chicago’s public housing and improve public housing residents’ quality of life. The Central Advisory Council is made up of the 15 Presidents of the Local Advisory Councils. In order to be successful, it has always had an MOU with the CHA which later came to include a funding agreement as well. This MOU governs all of the resident councils. The CAC meets monthly on the last Thursday. The CAC President plays a dual role as she also acts as a CHA Resident Commissioner.

The CAC has a staff person, Willie Lewis, a CHA Project Manager. Mr. Lewis has been with the CHA since about 1970. He works to support the residents and acts as the administrative leader of the Central Advisory Council. The CAC also has their own attorney. CAC members are given a stipend and business cards so that they can carry out their work.

The CAC focuses on keeping the CHA and its contractors accountable. In addition to their main meeting, the CAC generally has one tenant service meeting every month with staff. CHA staff only attends the CAC board meeting if they are invited. For example, if they are presenting about a CHA policy or program.

The tenant services meeting gives residents a forum to raise issues with CHA staff. As Crystal Palmer, the CHA liaison to the CAC explains, “[The CAC members] will call out contractors and the CHA if there’s an issue. For example, if a construction or security firm isn’t doing what they should do... [Residents] are living the issues. They’re on site so they know what the hot issues are.” CHA staff also use the tenant service meetings to get the “resident perspective” on programs.

As the liaison between the CAC and CHA, Ms. Palmer has a relationship with and understands both groups. This allows her to ensure a flow of information between them. If a new policy comes up, she will tell that CHA department, “you need to get in front of the CAC” or a specific resident council. Likewise, she can get the CAC connected to the right department in the housing authority when they have a concern. Ms. Palmer explains,

“If we are starting a new jobs program. We would present our ideas to the executive board of the CAC and then to the full group. We would want their input on what the program would look like.

That would be true for any CHA department—security, property management. They would want that input. That is really important. You want to acknowledge that residents know what is happening on the site. If you don't that is a big issue."

Resident Services staff note that the CHA made significant changes to Family Self Sufficiency programs based on resident feedback. They also relied on "very valuable" resident input to decide which staff and services residents wanted to retain with the transition to the Rental Assistance Demonstration program.



See [Guide 7: Training and Self-Sufficiency Programs](#), in this Toolkit for more information on the Family Self-Sufficiency program.

Resident Services also provides administration support, when needed, to the CAC. When the department is invited to and attends Board meetings they will take the minutes and produce a grid with questions that they take back to different departments for answers and then return to the CAC.

Security Committee of the Central Advisory Council

The Central Advisory Council has a number of standing committees.

Mr. Scott serves on the Security Committee. Their monthly meetings include security staff and front desk monitors (who are residents). Mr. Scott explains that at the meetings they, "discuss issues that have occurred in different communities, what can be done to curtail issues, what changes residents need from the security team and vice versa."

Mr. Scott explains that as a result of the committee work they were able to secure areas that were previously identified as having safety concerns. As an outcome of their meetings, the security firm began having personnel work as "rovers." These security officers work in pairs and walk or drive through the community, focusing on areas that were identified as having safety concerns. The security personnel regularly communicate with the district commanders from the police department.

Residents regularly come to these meetings and provide input on what they see that needs to be changed. For example, Mr. Scott says, if residents find a security officer on the phone all the time, they will record it and report what they've seen at these meetings.



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Resident Councils and CHA Transformation Plan

The resident councils were very involved with the CHA's long-term, transformation plan, to revitalize 25,000 public housing units, including recent RAD conversions. Mr. Lewis explains that, "Every development—those that were torn down and rebuilt—they had working groups." The Central Advisory Council secured a relocation right contract which said that people who were displaced had a right to come back to the property. Mr. Lewis states that the CHA was "the first in the country to have a relocation contract between the housing authority and the resident council." The CAC had support in the negotiations from their own attorney and the Legal Assistance Foundation. This process was funded by the CHA.



Tenant Participation Funds

The CAC has a funding agreement with the CHA that is renewed annually and provides support to their organization. It specifies that the CHA pays for their attorney and provides office supplies, their primary office space, and space at each development from the housing authority's portion of the tenant participation funds.

The CHA provides the portion of the tenant participation funds that are allocated for the resident councils to the CAC. The CAC then administers the tenant participation funds and passes on a portion to LACs. The LACs receive \$3 per month per occupied unit for resident activities.

Stipends are currently provided only to LAC presidents (CAC members) and range up to \$200 per month for the CAC President. Mr. Scott states though that they are working to reinstate stipends for the building council representatives. Mr. Scott's stipend is based on him contributing 20 volunteer hours per month as part of the CAC. He explains, "It never works out that way. I'm usually doing 60 hours per month." He is not complaining though, "It's our community so we do the work. The stipends just help us to do the work."



Resident Engagement

Members of the building councils and LACs engage closely with residents to understand and respond to their issues. Mr. Scott explains that the building council and LAC representatives often support individual residents when there's a discrepancy between them and management. He gives a recent example of a senior who had lost her keys.

The manager was charging her \$175 for replacements. But it was money she did not have. Mr. Scott went to CHA and asked about the protocol and actual cost for replacing keys. He then brokered an agreement for her to pay \$15 a month for 8 months (\$120) to cover the cost of the keys.

He further explained that as senior leaders and trusted members of the community, residents will come to the resident leaders for support with getting scooters or finding a home health aide. Mr. Scott advises that resident leaders,

"Be willing to listen and not be judgmental cause you never know what a person is going through. Listen and try to help as best you can."

At the building level, CHA Resident Services staff provide outreach and administrative support to the councils. This staff support is important because it provides continuity even as the elected leaders may change. It also means that leaders can carry out their roles of representing and working for the residents even if they are not skilled on a computer. These staff members make the flyers for meetings, do outreach, and attend meetings to take notes. Resident services staff members are closely connected to the community as they are either a current resident or were a resident when they were hired.

The Resident Services Coordinator at senior buildings supervises residents who act as Senior Monitors. As part of their work checking in on their neighbors and working in the building, Senior Monitors pass out flyers for the resident council meetings.

In addition to door-to-door outreach, senior buildings have electronic bulletin boards where the resident council posts meeting notices, agendas, and information on upcoming events. The Resident Services Coordinator also puts out a calendar of events every month.



Resident Council Training

Throughout the year, the CAC participates in various trainings.

At each election cycle the CHA does a Board training for everyone. This is a 3-day training, off-site, with CHA staff. The legal department provides training on compliance with CHA regulations and the resident council documents and agreements. The CHA may provide a training on roles and responsibilities. CAC members also attend 3 to 4 national trainings each year including through the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities (CLPHA), the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO)—a network of housing and community development professionals, and the National Association of Resident Services in Affordable and Assisted Housing (NAR SAAH).



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Resident Advisory Board and the Annual Plan

The elected officers of the Central Advisory Council serve as the Resident Advisory Board. With input from the full CAC, this group provides comments and input on the CHA Plans including the Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policies (ACOP). The CAC lawyer supports the representatives in preparing their comments.

Resident services staff explain that they strive to get resident feedback on all their plans, “We roll all of our new ideas by the CAC. We want their feedback.” They go on to explain that if the CHA fails to get CAC support, when the idea is brought before the CHA Board of Commissioners it will be stalled. “We have three residents on the Board of Commissioners and they can be very vocal if they have no knowledge or if there is something that they don’t agree with that we’re pushing forward. So, CHA staff go out and present potential changes. We also have public comment periods.”



Community Partnerships

The resident councils, at all levels, work with other community organizations to help support the residents. They are encouraged to seek out assistance from universities and nonprofit organizations. Leaders make sure they know the relevant local elected officials, including alderman, congressman, and state representatives. Mr. Lewis, the CHA manager for the Central Advisory Council, explains, “We invite them when we have issues and they come in (to the resident council meetings). We tell them our point and our stance and we expect them to support us because we pay taxes.”



Mr. Lewis recognizes that resident councils in Chicago are very active and that the leaders with the Central Advisory Council spend a lot of time supporting their community. He concludes that, “This level of activity has a lot to do with having a history of resident organizing—of being involved.”



Resources

Chicago Housing Authority: <https://www.thecha.org/>

Central Advisory Council: <https://www.thecha.org/residents/services/resident-council-leadership>

Interviewees

Lucas Fopma, Deputy Chief, Resident Services, Chicago Housing Authority

Willie Lewis, Manager, Central Advisory Council, Chicago Housing Authority

Crystal Palmer, Assistant Director, Resident Engagement in Community, Chicago Housing Authority

Robert Scott, Senior North Local Advisory Council Representative to the Central Advisory