



# Resident Council and Housing Authority Case Study

St Paul, MN

## Housing Authority Support for Resident Engagement



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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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## St Paul, MN Housing Authority Support for Resident Engagement

*“We [residents] want to make a difference... Of course, there’s a feeling of accomplishment and helping others. We’re all here for different reasons. We can help each other out. Our high-rise is a community. Let’s work together to make it good for everyone else.”*

— John Cardoza

### RAD Conversion

**In 2019, the St Paul PHA converted nearly all of its public housing stock to Project Based Rental Assistance (PBRA) through the RAD program.** Only the scattered site housing remains public housing.

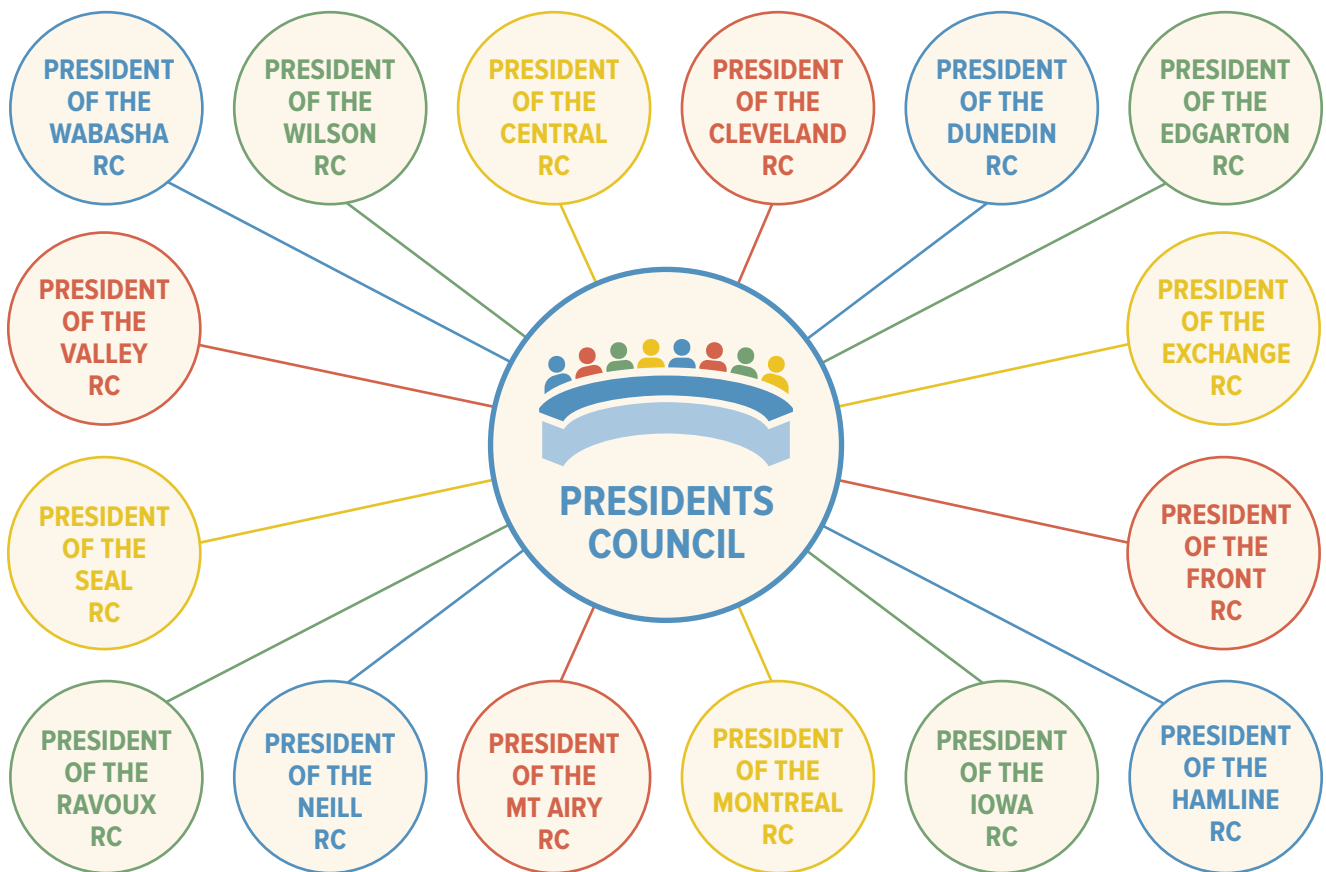
Residents living in PBRA properties are no longer automatically eligible to be on a Resident Advisory Board (RAB), be a PHA commissioner, or be on a jurisdiction-wide resident council unless the PHA voluntarily agrees. The owner must continue to allow residents to organize and form resident councils and must continue to provide \$25 per unit annually for resident participation, \$15 of which must be provided to the legitimate resident organization.

The St Paul PHA retained full ownership and management of the properties after the RAD conversion. Therefore, their relationship with residents, as the landlord, did not change with the conversion. For that reason, and given the long and successful history of partnering with the resident councils, the St Paul PHA decided to continue to support the same resident council structure that it had with public housing. The PHA continues to provide robust support to both the building-based and jurisdiction-wide resident councils and has a resident commissioner from a RAD site. The PHA does not include RAD residents on the RAB.

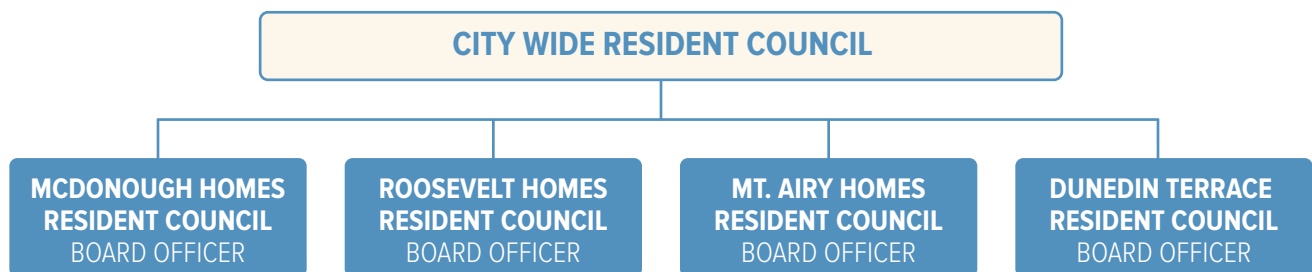


### Resident Council Structure

**The St Paul Public Housing Agency (St Paul PHA) has 20 formerly public housing properties, which converted to Section 8 through the RAD program.** These buildings, as well as the scattered site public housing, provide over 3800 units of RAD and public housing. Each of these buildings—16 senior high-rises and 4 family sites, has its own resident council.



The president, or another board member, from the 16 high-rise resident councils come together to form the Presidents Council. Officers from the 4 resident councils at the family sites, come together under the City Wide Resident Council. The Presidents Council meets monthly and City Wide Resident Council meets every other month, while the building-based councils meet at least quarterly and as often as monthly. Each of the resident councils is registered with the state as a 501(c)(3), nonprofit, organization. The St Paul PHA supports the councils with compliance as nonprofit organizations.



Alicia Huckleby, Resident Initiatives Director of the PHA explains that the housing authority is proud of their “partnership with the 22 organizations,” referring to the 20 building-based resident councils, the City Wide Resident Council and the Presidents Council.

Currently, the St Paul Housing Authority is working with scattered sites to get resident councils up and running. Residents from these properties can attend Citywide meetings as non-voting members.



## Resident Council Meetings

**Most resident councils and Presidents Council meet monthly between September and June and then take a summer break.** At the monthly resident council meetings, reports are provided by the secretary and treasurer, property management staff, and each committee. Committee reports may include security, fundraising, and gardening among others. Residents discuss issues related to their living conditions and quality of life. In August the councils propose, discuss, and approve a budget. The City Wide Resident Council meets every other month. The Resident Initiatives Coordinator provides information from other PHA staff as appropriate.



## Resident Council Elections

**Resident council elections are held annually through a process that begins in April with nominations and ends in June with elections.** At the June meeting new officers are sworn in and an officer reads aloud the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the PHA and the resident council. In July the new officers assume their roles. At the high-rises a resident from another high-rise will assist with the elections including making sure ballots are accounted for and certifying the election.

The City Wide Resident Council runs on the PHA fiscal year which begins in April. The organization holds elections annually between October and December and swears in new officers in April. They review and edit the MOU with the housing authority annually.



## Board Structure

**At the beginning of the year each high-rise selects an officer to represent them at the Presidents Council.** Each resident council chooses either a traditional board with a President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary and Fifth Officer or a five-member board. On the five-member board there is a treasurer, and sometimes secretary, but the other duties are divided among the officers or performed on a rotating basis. Each high-rise may also choose other positions or divisions of responsibilities that suit them. For example, the vice president may chair the executive meeting (where the agenda is set for the membership meeting) and coordinate social events.

Resident councils from the family sites send all their officers to the City Wide Resident Council. Officers are elected to form the City Wide Board. The family sites do not have presidents but rather chairs of their respective councils.



## Governing Documents

**Resident Council operations are governed by the Residents Council Guides which details policies, board roles and responsibilities, election procedures, and more.** Changes to the guides occur at the Presidents Council and City Wide Resident Council. The resident councils' MOUs with the housing authority are reviewed and voted on annually. Each council also has its own bylaws.



## Peer Leaders

**The St Paul PHA and resident councils have created a number of leadership positions where residents can receive special training and stipends.** These include Computer and QuickBooks Peers and Peer Advisors from the senior buildings.

QuickBooks Peers support the high-rise resident councils in reviewing their finances on a monthly basis. Computer peers use their computer skills to maintain functioning computer labs. These residents respond to help tickets that other residents put in and answer resident questions. They are appointed by the executive board and voted on by the resident council.

Peer Advisors are experienced resident leaders who support new resident council board members, work to resolve issues or disputes within resident councils, and serve as election judges. They may also fill vacant board positions, as long as the resident council has at least three officers to maintain a functioning resident council. As a Peer Advisor, John Cardoza is a Peer Treasurer for another high-rise resident council. He also supports the leadership of the new board members. For example, he sits with the new president and offers support on chairing meetings. Peer advisors may also take notes or send emails if there is an officer who is not comfortable with technology.

John Cardoza relays how important this support and mentorship is. He recalls that when he first became a resident council president, he cancelled a meeting because he did not know how to run it, not realizing this was against the bylaws. He then got the support of the resident coordinator who he was able to lean on. He now supports new officers and advises them to get to know the Residents Council Guide. He says, “It’s a boring read but a really useful tool.”



## Resident Engagement

**At the family sites where residents often have multiple jobs and children it can be difficult to find and recruit residents that want to be engaged and involved.** The PHA staff recognize these real barriers to resident participation and work to overcome them by providing support with engagement and to the resident council. St Paul PHA Human Services coordinators will spend time recruiting residents to serve. Staff liaisons may support the resident councils by recruiting speakers that will draw residents to meetings. The PHA emphasizes that the resident council is important because without one, residents at that building do not benefit from tenant participation funds.

John Cardoza, the President of the Cleveland Highrise recalls, “When I first moved here I didn’t know what a resident council was. The council needed a secretary and a president. [Another resident] told me she would be secretary, if I was president. I said sure.” He recounts that the other resident must have seen a leadership quality in him and that he appreciates that she recruited him. “She figured me out and put me under her wing. She became my mentor.”



*“Sometimes someone sees something in you that you don’t see until they pull it out of you.”*

**—John Cardoza**



John Cardoza. Photo credit: St. Paul PHA

John Cardoza reminds residents that it's okay for people to engage at different levels and finds that even people who are not active will often come out for food. Though he started without any experience, John Cardoza now serves as the president of his resident council, on the executive committee of the Presidents Council and is now going into his 3rd term as one of two Resident Commissioners on the St Paul PHA Board of Commissioners.

St Paul PHA has a very diverse resident population, which speaks over 20 languages. The St Paul PHA provides interpretation and translation services primarily for publications and staff-resident meetings. For resident council meetings, an assistant manager or resident, who is paid a stipend, generally provides interpretation. The St Paul PHA also uses their portion of tenant participation funds for interpretation for resident council meetings when needed.



## Resident Council Training

**Following elections each year, the St Paul PHA provides training to resident council leaders in areas that include board roles and responsibilities, dispute resolution, running a meeting, and leadership development.** The training also covers skills to work well together including how to listen to each other. Residents holding specific positions, particularly secretary and treasurer, receive training specific on their roles including how to take minutes or how to fill out a stipend request form. The St Paul PHA also contracts outside trainers. For example, they have hired the Minnesota Dispute Resolution Center to train leaders on conflict resolution, and proactive communication.





## Resident Council – Housing Authority Partnership

**Ms. Huckleby, Resident Initiatives Director for the St Paul PHA, explains that in order to have a strong partnership with resident councils, the councils need the same support structure that any other successful community organization would have.** For that reason, the PHA is “very heavy” on training, structure, and staff support for the resident councils.

PHA staff who are onsite at each property are responsible for maintaining and fostering a relationship with the resident council. An assistant manager or human service coordinator attends meetings and serves as the bridge to the St Paul PHA. This support helps with communication and creating uniformity amongst the councils. While individuals in the councils may change, the PHA maintains a consistent support structure. The assistant manager provides updates, asks for feedback to proposed policy changes, and works with the board to bring in presenters, including other housing authority departments. For example, if there is a new outside service provider, that person would be brought in to hear from the residents on their needs and what they would like to see.

Tara Johnson, who coordinates resident services at most of the senior buildings, finds that the resident council boards are often their “eyes and ears” in the building. These leaders are well known by other residents who come to them with concerns that the leaders bring to resident services. Resident Services then works with the resident council to craft a solution.

For example, if there is an issue with the laundry hours because of use by non-residents or late-night use, staff will work with residents to come up with a solution. The best solution will take into account residents’ concerns and suggestions. With the COVID 19 pandemic, resident services worked with resident councils to define new rules that balanced social distancing with access to common areas, including the computer rooms. This required ongoing communication and adjustment.

A full-time staff person supports the high-rise councils and the Presidents Council and another staff person supports the resident councils at the family buildings and the City Wide Council half-time. Among other responsibilities, if there is an issue that cannot be resolved between the building staff and resident council, that staff member will meet with both parties and guide them to a resolution.

The PHA explains that they work to balance support for the resident councils with allowing independence and empowering residents to take leadership. The level of PHA involvement depends on the preference of the resident council.



*“We believe that councils should have the number one voice in what’s occurring at their property. We owe it to tenants to give them a seat at the table and hear their concerns. This doesn’t always mean that they’ll have a final say on PHA policy making but, wherever possible, we want the decision to be collaborative.”*

**—Alicia Huckleby**





## Grants to the Resident Councils

**Resident councils regularly partner with the St Paul PHA Resident Services and Resident Initiatives departments to apply for outside grants that the councils are eligible for as nonprofit organizations.**

When staff find grant opportunities, it presents them to the resident councils and to the St Paul PHA Board. These programs can be very impactful for residents. For example, resident councils partnered with the St Paul-Ramsey County Public Health Department for eight years to bring wellness initiatives, including physical activity, nutrition, and smoking cessation, to the residents.

Resident councils may also receive special purpose grants from the St Paul PHA. For example, when residents requested Wi-Fi in the high-rises the PHA granted money to the Presidents Council to do a pilot project in one building. The pilot project tested how to bring Wi-Fi to the common areas of the building given the structural issues that needed to be addressed in the high-rises. The high-rises are tall, concrete buildings which prevent a strong signal, making it difficult to provide the service in a large area or across floors. Following the pilot, the PHA worked with resident councils to offer free internet in common areas on the 1st two floors of each building.



## Resident Council Funding

### Tenant Participation Funds

**Resident councils in the St Paul PHA receive funds from a variety of sources, including tenant participation funds, PHA special grants, and resident council fundraising (particularly vending machine sales and community room rentals).**

The PHA provides tenant participation funds to individual resident councils. The high-rises receive direct deposit and use a bill pay program or checks to provide stipends to the peer leaders and resident council officers. Resident councils must track and document meeting minutes, agendas, attendance, stipend requests, and check copies. All of these documents must be available for the PHA audit which takes place annually.

Resident councils may also apply for debit cards. At the family sites, property managers keep the cards. A resident council officer can sign out the card for 24 hours, use it to make a purchase, get a receipt, and sign the card back in.

Resident councils use their tenant participation funds for activities, office supplies, and stipends. The 16 councils get about \$2000 per year in two installments. For the senior buildings, the first payment comes at the start of the year in September. Assuming the council has properly tracked all of their expenses they receive the remainder halfway through the year. Funds for the family sites and City Wide Resident Council are also distributed in two payments. Stipends range from \$10 per month for some resident council officers to \$50 per month for QuickBooks Peers. The amount of the stipend for officers is determined by each resident council with an upper limit of \$25 per month.



## Other Funds

**The St Paul PHA provides other funds, outside of tenant participation funds and from non-federal sources, to support the resident councils in specific areas.** For example, the PHA may buy computer software and provides \$150 per year to resident councils for beautification projects.

For many years, the resident councils have earned their own income. The resident councils have a contract with vending machine companies and receive the profit from the vending machines. They are also able to rent out the community rooms in their buildings to residents looking to hold a social event. The policies related to the community room rentals are determined by the Presidents Council and individual family sites spelled out in the Residents Council Guide. Income that the resident councils earn from the vending machines or room rental has more flexibility than tenant participation funds and, for example, can be used to provide a full meal at a party. John Cardoza notes that he works hard to maximize their funds by getting donations from area businesses.

Resident councils use QuickBooks to track their expenses. This platform makes it possible for the officers to run their own reports.

The St Paul PHA staff stress that they work to provide training and support for resident councils to run effectively, while respecting their independence.



*Kim Nguyen, Resident Services Director, states,  
“We work to not do too much but be available to assist while looking at each of the resident council’s preferences. We work to empower them to take charge and take a leadership role. We work hard to have that good working relationship with each of the Councils.”*



## Resources

**Citywide Resident Council.** This website includes resources and information related to the citywide organization for the four family properties: <https://citywideresidentcouncil.org/>

**President's Council of St Paul.** This website includes a link to the Residents Council Guide as well as the organization's announcements and meeting minutes: <http://www.stphapresidentscouncil.org/>

**St Paul Housing Authority:** <https://www.stpha.org/>

**The Rental Assistance Demonstration—RAD Key Features For Public Housing Residents.**

Ed Gramlich. National Low Income Housing Coalition Modified, May 2018:

<https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/RAD-Outline-Updated-0518.pdf>

**US Department of Housing and Urban Development.** Notice H-2019-09 PIH-2019- 23 (HA) Rental Assistance Demonstration—Final Implementation, Revision 4. This notice clarifies that residents of RAD, PBRA, have the same rights to operate a resident organization and receive tenant participation funds as residents in public housing (24 CFR Part 245): <https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/PIH-2019-23.pdf>

## Interviewees

**Alicia Huckleby,** Resident Initiatives Director/Human Resources Director

**Charisse Brown,** Resident Services Senior Manager (Four Family Sites, Two Hi-Rises and Scattered Site Properties)

**Diane Anastos,** Resident Initiatives Coordinator (Liaison to the Citywide Resident Council and oversees Youth Connections)

**Tara Johnson,** Resident Services Senior Manager (Fourteen Hi-Rises and Resident Services liaison to the Presidents Council)

**Kim Nguyen,** Resident Services Director

**Youa Thao,** Resident Council Coordinator (Liaison to the Presidents Council and Resource for the 16 Hi-Rise Resident Councils)

**John Cardoza,** St. Paul PHA Hi-Rise Resident Commissioner to the PHA's Board