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Jersey City's Experiment in Tenant Safety

By Neil S. Piro

relationship with tenants. Such is no longer the case now as each evening groups of tenants voluntarily sit in their lobbies and monitor access to their buildings; an indication of a community spirit which has galvanized project tenants toward initiating plays, cake sales, Christmas programs, gospel sings and other activities including the placing of decorations in public corridors.

The Beginning of Improvements

The first step toward a revival of public housing in



Members of the A. Harry Moore project tenant patrol monitor access to the building by having visitors and residents "sign-in" as they enter and leave.

There is an unmistakable gleam of pride today in eyes which once emanated despair as they gazed upon properties under jurisdiction of Jersey City's Housing Authority.

In March 1973 the Authority was in default of its obligations to its tenants, its sponsors and itself; however, today there are activities which manifest hope and determination to improve the quality of life in the projects. In four high-rise buildings, formerly notorious as "tough, unmanageable projects," newly-painted walls have remained without graffiti since September 1973. A year ago, in at least five of the nine JCHA housing projects, bitter anger and frustration of the residents was unmistakably etched on battered walls of bleak hallways. JCHA's housing was in physical disrepair; its operating deficit was large and it maintained a negative if not antagonistic

Jersey City came about when it became clear that the complete absence of any working relationship with tenant organizations was a primary issue that had to be faced squarely and *soon*. Efforts to make physical improvements, stimulate fiscal solvency or deal with the rising crime rate and vandalism were viewed as futile in the absence of a meaningful tenant-management relationship. Besides a rather obvious lack of professional staff and massive internal reorganization that would be necessary, other factors had to be considered in developing effective tenant strategy. Existing tenant councils were considered inadequate bases from which to proceed, because they were loosely knit groups, unable to bring about improvements or to expand their base of support. Second, confronting project-wide problems was considered too large a task for a small group of tenants to handle when

they were having difficulties dealing with problems in each of their individual units. We concluded that rather common and somewhat superficial strategies of the past, such as LHA employment programs and provision of social services, would be grossly insufficient. Such strategies were individually geared and/or administered, and could not deal with the existing gamut of problems. Finally, whatever approaches were considered would have to be comprehensive in both theory and practice; they would have to encompass tenant organization, policy participation, security, daily maintenance, large scale remedial maintenance and tenant screening.

After much theoretical and empirical investigation with the help of New York City Housing Authority, we decided to initiate a five phase program that would:

- Organize the residents of a building into a "tenant patrol" to monitor maintenance of and access to their own building;

- Refurbish the interior of buildings where tenant patrols are operating, in accordance with patrol priorities and engineering necessity;

- Install a tenant grievance and screening procedure through which patrol members can deal with disorderly tenants and with the Housing Authority and deny future access to disruptive tenants;

- Install a series of interior hardware devices which would assist patrol members in monitoring their building and enhancing the privacy of their residences;

- Improve the appearance of the housing site and maintain upkeep with tenant patrols.

We decided to concentrate initial efforts on the A. Harry Moore complex which consists of seven twelve-story buildings containing 664 units located on a 7.6 acre site. The project houses 2,080 persons—70 percent black, 10 percent Spanish-speaking, and 20 percent white. Vacancies were increasing monthly. The grounds and building interiors were rundown and the project was viewed by public officials as "unmanageable" and by tenants as "the toughest." However, it was believed that it might be turned around and become the project that would begin to dispel the notion that low-income high rises can't work.

We decided to begin organization of tenant patrols and interior refurbishing in only one building; this, we believed, would serve a number of key purposes. Organizationally, it allowed for a limited professional staff to concentrate on a smaller number of tenants, thereby allowing communication to be relatively easy and rapid. This coincided with our original intention to utilize the building as the unit for patrol organization. This lent a high self-interest plane of motivation (i.e., to improve *our* building) and maximized the potential for individual, rather than representative, participation in the definition and fulfilling of patrol program roles. Also, by executing interior refurbishing in only one building concomitant with patrol organization, the work would be within staff capacity and could be accomplished in a reasonable time.

Producing visible results quickly would be imperative to expanding and sustaining tenant confidence in the Authority and in themselves. As tenants within the building and in other buildings actually saw dramatic improvements accompanying the organization of a building patrol, the connection between the two would become self-evident.

Changes Implemented

Project leaders were contacted. They in turn solicited floor captains who solicited the support of two or three neighbors. Tenants and LHA officials met to determine repair priorities; an engineering survey was taken of the building, and refurbishing began, consisting of plastering and painting hallways in colors of the tenants' choice. Tiling, painting stairwells, replacing metal-plated "windows" with panes of lexan, and other improvements were made.

As refurbishing proceeded so did the organization of the building patrol. Tenants designed patrol buttons

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which were given to each member; lobby patrol duty schedules were compiled and a series of training sessions held to train patrol members in handling a variety of situations they might encounter. On September 4, 1973, the first organized tenant patrol began working in the first refurbished building in A. Harry Moore.

Security Patrol Fully Operational

Three to four tenants began to sit in the lobby of their building from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. and a second group from 9:00 to 11:00 p.m., greeting fellow tenants, explaining the program to tenants in the building who were not yet participating, and asking non-residents to "sign-in" and indicate their destination. The tenants are not cops and not vigilantes; if an incident and/or crime develops it is reported to the Jersey City Police Department Headquarters radio room which dispatches either a police officer or guard from its Bureau of Housing Security. The patrol members are simply interested tenants committed to insuring that their building is a decent place to live and raise children.

The program caught on quickly; concerned and dissatisfied tenants from other buildings and other projects asked, "Why that building? What about us?" Our response was simple: "Those tenants organized into an effective building patrol and the Authority made repairs with the confidence that improvements will be maintained through the patrol's commitment." The message seemingly got

across clearly. Numerous groups of other concerned tenants began the difficult process (with some LHA staff assistance) of organizing cohesive building organizations. To date there are eight high-rise buildings in various stages

buildings and by the growing spirit of real community among the patrol members, it is neither devoid of problems nor a public housing panacea.

The Value of Organizing

The formation of building organizations has clearly surpassed our capacity to initiate concomitant refurbishing activities, so much so that we have directed our tenant organizers to curtail further contact with any building not already in the process of organizing. There is absolutely no point in encouraging the formation of additional building patrols until our maintenance task force can handle additional buildings. In fact to do this would in all probability have a negative effect, making future organizational efforts even more difficult. Our staff presently can refurbish only one building at a time, at an approximate cost of \$20,000 a building—\$6,000 in materials and \$14,000 in labor. Average completion time is 1½ months. Tenant patrols are organizing themselves at twice the pace. We also have insufficient funds to properly approach the fourth and fifth phases of the program, i.e., interior security hardware and site improvements. Two projects will in all probability be ready and waiting for such activity by the summer of 1974.

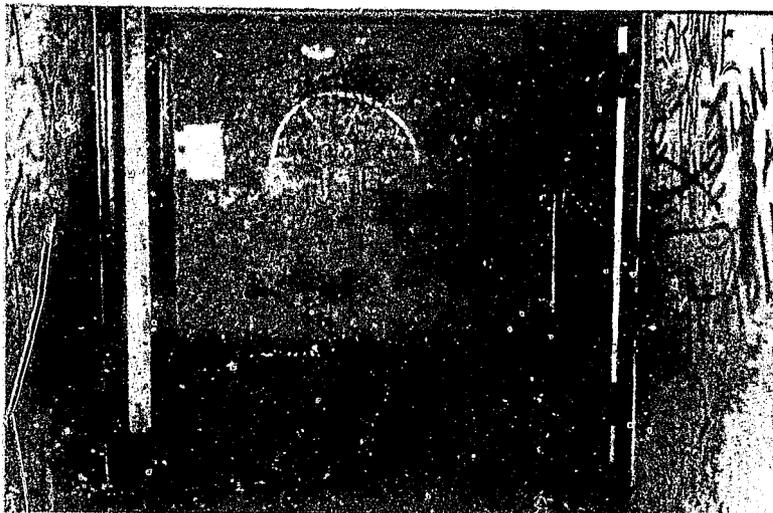
Problems Scrutinized

Patrol leadership is not yet as problem-free as it might become. Building organizations are often too dependent upon a few key tenants; this creates problems for both the patrol and its leaders.

Nonetheless, despite difficulties and temporary weaknesses we find the patrol program a significant first step in making public housing work and are confident the program will persist and prevail. A number of public officials have observed the Jersey City program in operation and voiced their support and enthusiasm. Jersey City Mayor Paul Jordan has committed over two million dollars in police, sanitation, planning and social services to the LHA in support of the program. James Sweeney, HUD Newark Area Office Director and S. William Green, New York Regional Office Director, have given the LHA maximum flexibility in administering the program and have committed their offices to support of the program as best they can.

Finally, and most importantly, our greatest hope lies with the tenants, themselves, the consumers of public housing. Participation on their part has crossed age, race and family size barriers. There are two-parent and one-parent families who are active patrol members; there are welfare recipients and fully-employed families; blacks, Puerto Ricans and whites; senior citizens and teenagers—all exerting exemplary efforts to improve the quality of their residence. Their response to our initiatives has become literally overwhelming; we can foresee no reason to doubt its continuance. 

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TOP—Before refurbishing and the tenant patrol program, hallways were dismal and walls in the A. Harry Moore project were filled with graffiti.

BOTTOM—A striking contrast is offered in decorated hallways after institution of the tenant patrol program.

of patrol organization, six of which are currently in various stages of interior refurbishing. The Authority has not spent one dollar on broken lightbulbs in organized buildings; none has been broken. Nor have we had to replace one hallway or stairwell window, despite an average of more than two children per unit. New front and back doors in each patrolled building are still on their hinges; they belong to the patrols and the tenants take personal responsibility for their maintenance.

It is important to note here, however, that although the program has far surpassed any of our expectations, as evidenced by both the present condition of the organized



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