

# Housing

Addressing the needs of Housing Authorities & Community Development Organizations in Illinois

focus

## Message from the President: Jackie L. Newman



ILNAHRO recently held its' Annual Conference *Navigating the Future* in East Peoria Illinois. The conference was a **HUGE** success!! ILNAHRO is appreciative of its conference sponsors: Johnson Controls; AHRMA Insurance Group, The Inspection Group and the Springfield Housing Authority and greatly appreciate the vendors for their participation at the conference. Workshop topics included Safety Awareness – with an Active Shooter Workshop; Rental Assistance Demonstration; CHDO Collaborative, PIC. . . Everything But Errors; Affordable Housing Development & Finance and HUD representative was on hand to discuss Fair Housing and Project Based Vouchers.

ILNAHRO recognized State Poster Contest winners at the annual luncheon and awarded its first Self Sufficiency Award which is an award that recognizes an affordable housing resident who has successfully transitioned from government dependence to Self Sufficiency. The inaugural winner of this award was Ms. Towanna Williams of Freeport, Illinois who was one of the keynote speakers at the close-out luncheon. Larry Williams, Freeport Housing Authority Executive Director, closed the luncheon out with a powerful and inspirational message while introducing the initiative “Those People” whose mission is to empower individuals who desire to overcome life’s hardships and provide a platform to share stories that break negative stereo-types surrounding impoverished families. Check it out at [www.thosepeople.us/](http://www.thosepeople.us/)

The election of ILNAHRO Officers took place during the annual conference and the ILNAHRO Board includes:

ILNAHO STATE CHAPTER EXECUTIVE BOARD OFFICERS		
Jackie L. Newman	Springfield Housing Authority	Chapter President
Alan Zais	Winnebago Housing Authority	Senior Vice President
Jennifer Novak Chan	Illinois Housing Development Authority	Secretary
Jodi Stromberg	Rockford Housing Authority	Treasurer
William Pluta	Illinois Housing Development Authority	Vice President - CR&D
Kim Holman-Short	Bloomington Housing Authority	Vice President - Member Services
Ron Clewer	Rockford Housing Authority	Vice President – Legislative
Larry Williams	Freeport Housing Authority	NCRC At Large Representative
Saul Himelstein	The Inspection Group	Vendor Liaison
Keon Jackson	Lake County Housing Authority	Emerging Leaders Representative
Brenda Coates	Peoria Housing Authority	Past President
Melvin Grimes	Moline Housing Authority	Vice President – Commissioners
Charles Chambers	Waukegan Housing Authority	Vice President – Housing
John Prather	East Saint Louis Housing Authority	Vice President – Professional Development

Finally, ILNAHRO recognized the work and efforts of Brenda Coates, Peoria Housing Authority Executive Director, who will be retiring from the Housing Authority January 2016 after over 27 years of service in the affordable housing industry. Brenda has been very active on the State, Regional and National levels of NAHRO and we wish her well as she is looking forward to an active retirement life.



We ask that you MARK YOUR CALENDARS NOW and plan to attend ILNAHRO’s 2016 Annual Conference which will be hosted by Rockford Housing Authority, Freeport Housing Authority, Winnebago Housing Authority and Boone County Housing Authority in Rockford, Illinois August 17-19, 2016. Our theme will be: ILNAHRO: Together, Towards Tomorrow!

Respectfully submitted,  
*Jackie L. Newman*  
 Jackie L. Newman  
 ILNAHRO President



# In **THE SPOTLIGHT**

## Award Recognition

The Housing Authority of the City of Freeport (HACF) was recognized with two housing industry state awards. The Illinois Association of Housing Authorities (IAHA) annually gives recognition to an Illinois Housing Authority and HUD Official for their outstanding achievement in housing through various awards. This year the HACF was awarded two IAHA Outstanding Achievement Awards.

This year, the HACF was awarded for Outstanding Achievement for Resident Services which recognizes an agency that has developed programs that enhance the lives of residents. The award application focused on the holistic approach HACF has taken with the Workforce Development Institute [WDI] in serving all ages. The adult WDI provides training on soft skills to address skills lacking in the workforce while Junior and Teen WDI programs were created to teach soft skills to youth to help them in maturing and success in school. Teen WDI is for ages 13 to 16 and Junior WDI is for youth ages Kindergarten through sixth grade. HACF recognizes children learn and establish habits that continue on into adulthood so HACF wants to ensure they are good habits – showing up, on time, with a good attitude, and motivated for the tasks at hand. Adult and Teen WDI both are hands-on intensive courses with personal reflection, goal setting, class discussion, exercise, and case studies. The Junior WDI class is in conjunction with the Reading Readiness Bootcamp that was started to combat summer reading loss, keep children excited about learning throughout the year and prepare for the upcoming school year includes goal setting, educational work, physical fitness, arts and crafts. For all the programs, to graduate from WDI, participants must attend every day and on time because attendance is a key factor to succeeding in all aspects of life. Due to offering WDI for all ages, allows multiple members of a family to learn and grow together to obtain self-sufficiency and be successful in school, work, and family life.



The adult WDI was created in 2013 with the purpose is to identify Freeport as a “workforce ready community” and promote self-sufficiency. The 8-week, 72-hour program teaches soft skills to address skills employers say are lacking in the workforce. The WDI curriculum covers the following soft skills: positive attitude and behavior, adaptability, responsibility, professionalism, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork. All participants take the ACT WorkKeys and Talent Assessments and establish goals for progress to be evaluated during the WDI program. The last program week consists of work study hours causing participants to apply the learned skills. Successful completers of WDI earn a Certificate of Workforce Readiness that will be recognized by local employers in addition to the Work Keys Certificate. WDI has a high success rate of 90% of students graduating WDI with employment. A majority of the WDI students thus far have been HACF residents but more Freeport area residents are participating to reap the benefits of these skills.





The second award was for Outstanding Achievement for Creativity recognizes programs that produce housing in an innovative manner, improve the efficiency of administrative operations or improve client services. Mr. Larry Williams, creator and owner of [www.thosepeople.us](http://www.thosepeople.us) and the facebook page [werthosepeople](https://www.facebook.com/werthosepeople), started the website and facebook to create a platform to help break stereotypes and bring people together. It is his hope people will use the stories as a road map for their own personal lives. The purpose is to empower individuals who desire to overcome life's hardships and provide a platform to share their stories to help break negative stereotypes surrounding impoverished families. The stories are of people that have currently or previously struggled through the process to achieve self-sufficiency. Besides the personal stories, the site includes employment and empowerment opportunities, noteworthy readings and posts, and applicable news articles. Mr. Williams believes there is no better way to inspire someone than through the personal stories of individuals who have succeeded in their journey in spite of the obstacles and challenges they faced. He has invited people to share their story via the website, facebook, and requested PHAs to make residents aware of the initiative and share. He has given out over 100 t-shirts in which individuals are proudly wearing one of their choice stating: "I AM NOT LAZY" "I AM NOT INADEQUATE!" "I AM NOT UNEDUCATED". Proceeds from the t-shirt sales are going to a national scholarship fund.

Mr. Williams has taken a term that has been thrown around in political and public speeches, in meetings, and throughout generations and chosen to use it in effectively addressing and breaking stereotypes of impoverished families. We each have a connection to "Those People"; they are our residents, our neighbors, our family, and our friends. This is a powerful initiative connecting people through experiences and stories inspiring us all to stop judging, break stereotypes, and recognize are all human and fall down sometimes but it is how we react and stand up again. The initiative has gone nationwide as Mr. Williams participates in national, regional, and state housing conferences and he has gained strong support of the initiative from organization such as NAHRO and ReThink Housing, industry colleagues, community members, and housing residents. Unfortunately, there have been others who have twisted and distorted the message behind "Those People," but it further embraces the initiative's purpose. The empowerment is apparent in the words as people tell their stories of the challenges they faced/are facing with low income and the negative perceptions they experience. This initiative through empowerment will aid in breaking not only stereotypes but also the cycle of poverty.

# HUD News

## HUD Reinstates PHA Employee Compensation Reporting September 15, 2015

On September 11, HUD issued PIH 2015-14 to provide PHAs with guidance on completing the HUD-52725 form. Unlike in prior years, HUD is not pairing the 2014 compensation reports with Operating Fund eligibility submissions. According to the notice, all PHAs are required to submit compensation information for their three highest paid employees. Each PHA will receive a link to the online version of the revised HUD-52725 form, and all reports must be submitted through HUD's system. Senior HUD officials have stated that the September 30, 2015 due date reported in the notice will be extended as a result of the delays in distributing the form.

For 2014, the Appropriations Act prohibited PHAs from using any Tenant-Based Voucher, Operating Fund, or Capital Fund dollars to pay any amount of salary above the base rate of pay for level IV of the Executive Schedule, or \$157,100 for FY 2014. This restriction applied to salaries for each PHA's FY 2014, regardless of which years' appropriations act the funding originated from. However, for 2014, the limitation applied only to salary and not to certain other forms of compensation including benefits, bonuses, and other incentive pay. For 2015 and subsequent years, the appropriations language was amended to also include bonuses as part of the limitations.

On April 22, NAHRO filed comments in response to yet another notice in the Federal Register describing proposed changes to the HUD-52725 form. Since its inception, NAHRO has raised serious concerns about the information collection itself as well as the statutory limitations upon which it is based. However, NAHRO was pleased to note that the proposed revisions to the HUD-52725 "represent an incremental improvement over the existing form." In particular, NAHRO noted that the Department "proposed changes that incrementally address the problems created by the most recent iteration of the HUD-52725 by no longer differentiating between Section 8 and Section 9 funds." However, the larger issues of detangling various income sources that flow into the COCC remain unaddressed.

In addition, the letter addresses the potential for the proposed changes to result in new ambiguities. NAHRO has long argued that the Department's information collection will actually harm efforts to increase transparency by stripping the compensation data of its relevant context. While HUD's proposal to use a standardized drop-down menu of titles will create an appearance of streamlining and allow the Department and others to more easily analyze the data, it will erase meaningful differences among individuals who will be shoe-horned into each category.

## HUD Issues Flat Rent Guidance Sep 10, 2015

On September 9, HUD published PIH 2015-13, providing PHAs with implementation guidance for the changes to flat rents that were enacted as part of the FY 2015 Consolidated Appropriations Act. In addition to this guidance, HUD also published an Interim Rule on September 8 formally incorporating the changes into the program regulations. While the guidance is effective immediately, the Interim Rule does not become effective until October 8, and, although there is no public comment period for the notice, HUD is accepting

comments until November 9 before moving forward with the development of a final rule. Once the rule goes into effect, PHAs will have the option of adopting its provisions immediately, waiting until a final rule is published, or continuing their current flat rent-setting policies. NAHRO encourages PHAs to begin reviewing their flat rent schedules and policies immediately, but reminds PHAs that no changes can be made until the regulations become effective on October 8.

NAHRO is pleased to announce that we will be offering an e-Briefing to help PHAs understand the new flat rent regulations on September 14, 2015. This e-Briefing will cover everything PHAs need to understand about the process for calculating and setting flat

# HUD News

rents, applying for exceptions, restructuring phase-in policies, and maintaining annual compliance. To learn more about this important training opportunity and register to participate, go to <http://www.nahro.org/e-briefings>.

As a result of advocacy from NAHRO and others, the FY 2015 Appropriations Act provided the HUD Secretary with significant discretionary authority to use a more appropriate standard for setting flat rents than the one required by FY 2014 Act. To that end, the notice outlines the three options available to PHAs for determining their flat rents:

**Traditional FMR:** PHAs have the option to continue using the regional FMRs as the basis for calculating their flat rents. Flat rents should be set no lower than 80 percent of FMR, with adjustments made for tenant paid utilities.

**Small Area FMR:** PHAs have the option to use the zip-code based Small Area FMRs (SAFMR) for metropolitan counties or the unadjusted rents for counties not covered by SAFMRs as the basis for calculating their flat rents. As with traditional FMRs, flat rents should be set no lower than 80 percent of SAFMR, with adjustments made for tenant paid utilities. In areas where the calculated SAFMR is lower than the statewide minimum FMR, PHAs are allowed to use the calculated FMR, also known as the “unadjusted rent,” which HUD will publish on its website. PHAs can find SAFMR data at <http://www.huduser.org/portal/datasets/fmr/smallarea/index.html>.

**Exception Flat Rents:** For communities in which the FMR and SAFMR do not appropriately reflect the market value of a property or unit, a PHA can apply to HUD for an exception. To apply for an exception, a PHA must demonstrate the need by assessing the value of the unit. PHAs should consider location, quality, size, unit type, age of unit, amenities, services, maintenance, and included utilities when determining the market value. To the extent possible, these market analyses should be based on rents paid for similar units in the unassisted market. To request an exception, PHAs should send an email to [FlatRentExceptionRequests@hud.gov](mailto:FlatRentExceptionRequests@hud.gov) with the address and unit number of the property, the market analysis, and the proposed flat rent schedule. Like rent reasonableness determinations in the HCV program,

these determinations must be made updated, and a new exception granted, on an annual basis.

The new provisions preserve the restriction that a household’s flat rent cannot increase more than 35 percent in a single year. However, the new notice does remove some of the additional phase-in flexibility that HUD granted through PIH 2014-12. That notice allowed all PHAs to phase in new flat rents over a period of up to three years, a flexibility which 2015-13 voids. Now, all PHAs must charge the full amount of the new flat rent unless such a flat rent would increase the household’s payment by more than 35 percent. This change should be implemented at the time of each household’s annual rent option, at which time they should be offered the choice between an income-based rent and the flat rent as established by one of the three methods previously discussed. Although HUD regulations (24 CFR §960.253(e)(2) and §960.257(a)(2)) allow PHAs to conduct re-examinations of flat renters only every three years, the requirement to conduct an annual rent option remains in place. In years for which the PHA does not complete a full income recertification, the income-based rent offered should be calculated on the basis of the most recent examination of family income and composition.

Several provisions of the changes implemented in 2014 continue to apply. PHAs continue to be required to update their flat rents on an annual basis, no later than 90 days following the issuance of new FMRs. The proposed FY 2016 FMRs were published in the Federal Register on September 8, and NAHRO encourages PHAs to visit the HUD User website to review these values before they are finalized in October. PHAs should update their Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policies as necessary to reflect changes in the methodology for calculating flat rents. Unlike in 2014, HUD has not determined that these changes constitute a significant amendment for all PHAs, so PHAs should consult their own definition to determine whether they need to treat this change as a significant amendment to the PHA plan. In addition, PHAs will no longer be required to document the methods by which the flat rents are set, except in cases where the PHA applies to HUD for an exception.

# “We Shall Not Be Moved”: A Hunger Strike, Education, and Housing in Chicago

By [Eve L. Ewing](#), *The New Yorker* - September 21, 2015



On a recent Friday, near twilight in the Bronzeville community of the South Side of Chicago, a group of protesters and their supporters marched from the national headquarters of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition to President Obama’s house. It’s not a long walk, but this crowd moved slowly. Parents pushed young children in strollers, and held the older ones by their hands. College students moved with a vigor that belied the solemnity of the march, which was organized to support the group of parents and community members that has been engaged in a hunger strike to re-open a local high school. Elders cautiously stepped down from the curb to uneven asphalt. Twice, a bus whizzed by on its evening route, finding space to pass even as the marchers took up a lane of traffic. Both times, the drivers honked and raised gloved fists, nodding in support. By the time the procession arrived at the corner across from the President’s home, the sun had fallen. A circle of protesters formed across from a line of cement barriers, watchful guards, an oversized black S.U.V., and a thick wall of shrubbery. As a police van passed, an old song rose from the circle: “We shall not, we shall not be moved / Just like a tree that’s planted by the water / We shall not be moved.”

The hunger strike was started in response to the closing, at the end of the last school year, of Walter H. Dyett High School. The closure was the final act in a four-year phase-out: the school was no longer allowed to enroll new students, teachers slowly trickled away, and the students who remained were encouraged to transfer elsewhere. In the 2014-2015 school year, only

thirteen students remained in Dyett’s final graduating class. The school was shuttered for being what the district called “chronically underperforming.”

In response to the planned closure, a group of local community members, educators, and organizations calling itself the Coalition to Revitalize Walter H. Dyett School submitted a plan to re-open Dyett with a focus on “global leadership and green technology.” The Chicago Public Schools system agreed to review the proposal, along with two others, but ultimately cancelled the hearing. In August, 2015, members of the coalition announced the hunger strike. In early September, eighteen days into the strike, [C.P.S. announced](#) plans to re-open Dyett as an arts-focussed school. According to the strikers, they were not involved in the development of that new plan and they were barred from entering the [press conference](#) at which it was announced. On Saturday, the strike’s thirty-fourth day, the [protesters announced its end](#).

Many Chicagoans have rallied behind the coalition, but others, on the school board and in the media, have questioned whether a new Dyett will be able to enroll enough students to be a vibrant and sustainable school. The population in the surrounding community has fallen in recent years, and that decline has become a justification for school closures. “Where are they going to get their children from? Because right now there are not that many kids in the neighborhood. That would be the only question I’d have,” Dr. Mahalia Hines, a Board of Education member, said at an August meeting. This argument—that schools on the city’s predominately African-American South and West Sides should be closed because too many people have moved away from these areas—was also used during the saga of Chicago’s 2013 school closings, in which forty-nine public schools were closed in one fell swoop.

The former superintendent Barbara Byrd-Bennett explained the closures by citing what she termed a “utilization crisis.” “For too long, children in certain parts of our city have been cheated out of the resources they need to succeed in the classroom because they are trapped in underutilized schools,” she said at the

time. “The utilization crisis threatens our ability to provide every child in every school with access to a well-rounded, high-quality education that they deserve.” Byrd-Bennett’s argument that the schools should close because they were enrolled below their capacity was intended to counter another argument that was persistently bubbling up across the city—that the school-closing process was racist, and the schools were being closed because they served black students and, in many cases, employed black teachers. “What I cannot understand, and will not accept is that the proposals I am offering are racist,” Byrd-Bennett told members of the school board, local media, and assembled community members at a 2013 board meeting. “The greatest population losses in our city over the past decade have taken place in the South and the West sides. Underutilized schools in these areas are the result of demographic changes and not race.”

But this picture fails to account for two of Chicago’s least-favorite reasons for national notoriety: the city’s history of segregation and its public-housing system. Perhaps the demographic changes that drove enrollment numbers down at schools like Dyett—indeed, the very “utilization crisis” itself—did not arise by happenstance but through the machinations of where and how black people in Chicago have been allowed to live in the course of the last hundred years. (Jelani Cobb recently wrote about [school reform, closures, and racism](#) in the magazine.)

As thousands of African-Americans moved from the agricultural south to the industrial north during the Great Migration, many of them came to call Chicago home. But they were met with violence and restrictions that limited their housing options. Between 1917 and 1921 in Chicago, fifty-eight bombs struck the homes of black residents, bankers who loaned them mortgages, and real-estate agents who sold them property—a rate of one bombing every twenty days in a period of under four years. The home of Jesse Binga, the founder of the city’s first black-owned bank, was bombed six times, and no culprit was ever arrested even after police guards were assigned to watch the house and Binga offered a thousand-dollar reward.

In 1941, the newly formed Chicago Housing Authority opened the Ida B. Wells Homes on the corner of Pershing and State Park Way (now King Drive). While the city already had four public-housing projects built before the Second World War, the Wells project (named

after the writer and anti-lynching crusader who had lived only a few blocks away) was the first intended for Chicago’s black residents. Many of the first residents of Wells were thrilled to move there, welcoming the safe and well-maintained living conditions. In J. S. Fuerst’s “When Public Housing Was Paradise,” a collection of oral histories from Chicago Housing Authority residents and administrators, one person who moved in during that first year called Wells “some of the best housing you could have. We had plenty of heat, and I don’t remember any roaches or rats.” Another recalls being impressed, as a child, by “the new shiny stoves and refrigerators, and then a living room and a kitchen. It was nice and spacious, clean and well-lit, and it was home!”

And safe, affordable housing was desperately needed. Violence, redlining, and restrictive covenants—private agreements between property owners and real-estate agents that homes not be sold to or occupied by black residents—kept black Chicagoans from venturing too far across the city in search of housing in the private market. Restrictive covenants were called “a marvelous delicately-woven chain armour ... [excluding] any member of a race not Caucasian” by one member of the Chicago Real Estate Board, which even provided templates and model contracts that real-estate agents could use to develop their own exclusionary contracts.

Through formal and informal means, black Chicagoans were literally kept in their place. By 1940, Bronzeville’s population had reached more than a hundred and fifty thousand, squeezed into an area of about three square miles—a density twice that of the city average. Many were crammed together in “kitchenettes,” tiny apartments carved out of units initially intended to hold only a few families and refashioned into small spaces with shared hallway bathrooms. Richard Wright described Bronzeville’s kitchenettes in his 1941 book “12 Million Black Voices”:

Sometimes five or six of us live in a one-room kitchenette. ... The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.

While Chicago is known today as one of America’s most segregated cities, in the early days of public housing there was a possibility that the C.H.A. would

serve as an engine for creating integrated communities. [Elizabeth Wood](#), the agency's first director, was in favor of maintaining diverse residences and implemented a quota system in the hopes of bringing black and white families together in one area. And *families* were what the C.H.A. wanted; Wood argued that children were the most important beneficiaries of public housing.

One of these goals was met, and one was not. Chicago's white residents made it clear that they were not as enthused about the prospect of integration as Wood was. In 1947, mobs, infuriated that eight black families had moved into the C.H.A.'s Fernwood Homes, initiated violence that lasted for four nights and required more than a thousand police officers to quell. In 1953, a light-skinned African-American woman named Betty Howard was assigned housing in the all-white Trumbull Park Homes. When her family moved in, and neighbors recognized them as black, white mobs set off explosives and broke windows at their home until the family required police escorts to leave the house. Political leaders followed suit. When C.H.A. officials appeared before the city council with proposals for new housing construction, white aldermen routinely slashed at the lists of prospective locations until those projects slated for black communities were all that remained. What resulted was the construction of five more high-density housing projects, bringing the total in Bronzeville to eight thousand two hundred and thirty-three units, including the original Ida B. Wells and an extension added on in 1955.

As for the goal of providing homes to children, Bronzeville's public housing did that and then some. While architects and urban planners debated whether the towering high-rise structure that became such an iconic feature of C.H.A. housing was actually beneficial for residents or not, policymakers missed something else altogether. D. Bradford Hunt, the author of "Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing," argues, "The urgent question should have been this: How many children can successfully live in a high-rise building?"

In 1970, the families who lived in the Robert Taylor Homes, also in Bronzeville, averaged six people each—a total of six thousand two hundred and fifty adults and twenty thousand four hundred and forty children. Children outnumbered adults by more than three to one. In most other parts of the city, that ratio was inverted. One resident remembered her

frustration with the crowding of children, telling the sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh about her memory of waiting in blocks-long lines for the merry-go-round on the playground, holding an ice-cream cone that would melt well before she could get on the ride.

In his book, Hunt argues that the comparatively few adults available to interact with each child helped create the conditions for "social disorder," including gang and drug activity. The city shifted its public-housing philosophy along similar logic. Ida B. Wells, the Robert Taylor Homes, and other Bronzeville high-rise projects have all been torn down as part of the C.H.A.'s "Plan for Transformation," which Mayor Richard M. Daley launched in 1999. The C.H.A. touted its plan as a socially symbolic effort, one that went beyond physical changes to the city's housing stock, writing that it "aims to build and strengthen communities by integrating public housing and its leaseholders into the larger social, economic and physical fabric of Chicago.... Where there were once isolated superblocks, the street grid is being recreated to seamlessly integrate the new developments into the surrounding neighborhoods."

The agency declared that residents would have the right to return to the newly constructed mixed-income housing that would replace the high-rises. It offered vouchers to find affordable housing in the city's private market in the meantime—but not necessarily a right to return to their former community. In 2005, Venkatesh and Isil Celimli wrote that seventy-five per cent of C.H.A. residents surveyed stated a preference for returning to their old neighborhoods, but that [less than twenty per cent](#) would be able to do so. "I didn't ask for none of this. But C.H.A. promised me," one C.H.A. resident told the *Chicago Tribune*, in 2013. "They said there would be brand-new units and a brand-new complex. They say they want a mixed-income community.... Like thousands of others, C.H.A. told me I have a right to return. But to where?" Those families that remain in the C.H.A. system are subject to a variety of eligibility standards in order to stay, such as having to work thirty hours per week, requirements that they have adequate childcare and good credit ratings, and being subject to drug screening and background checks.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the community where children once waited for hours just to use playground equipment and where the requirements have become prohibitive for the thousands of residents who once lived in public housing has now lost many



of the young people who might otherwise fill its classrooms. According to population reports from the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children, from 1990 to 1995, Bronzeville lost only two hundred and seventy two children. In the next five years, the community lost more than six thousand. In the five-year period after that, between 2000 and 2005, Bronzeville lost more than seven thousand six hundred children. Between 2005 and 2010, nearly another two thousand seven hundred moved away.

A century ago, migrants from the South came to

Bronzeville in search of the freedom that had remained so elusive even after the end of slavery. Undoubtedly, though they came with the hope for economic prosperity, they were also looking for that portion of the American dream that has always had a special salience for black people: a quality education. What they found in the nineteen-twenties was physical, psychic, and structural violence that pinned them into place. What their descendants found in the two thousands was displacement, first from their homes, then from their schools. When black Chicagoans of today sing "We shall not be moved," it's both a promise and a prayer.

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## Miller joins Housing Authority

First Posted: 6:18 pm - September 14th, 2015 - 818 Views

By Linda N. Weller - [lweller@civitasmedia.com](mailto:lweller@civitasmedia.com)



ALTON — A Mississippi native is planning to bring a voice and concerns of public housing residents to the Alton Housing Authority Board of Commissioners while serving in her new post.

"I live out there and I just want to add input," said new Commissioner

Shirley Miller, 49, of the 900 block of Oakwood Road, in Oakwood Estates public housing complex. "I'm glad I can do something positive."

The Alton City Council on Sept. 9 unanimously approved Mayor Brant Walker's appointment of Miller to fill the vacancy left by the death of Commissioner Zittie Harris, 72, on Aug. 23. Harris served 7.5 years on the board, with her final term expiring in Oct. 2019, when Miller's term now will end.

Miller said she has lived in Alton for 21 years and has a master's degree in health administration. She has three children, ages 30, 29 and 27, with the youngest living with her in Oakwood. She has worked as a secretary in the main, administrative office at

Edwardsville High School since December.

One of the issues she said she wants to address is security at Oakwood, location of a homicide on Aug. 8. Police said the alleged, 17-year-old shooter mistook victim James E. Hubbard Jr., 41, for someone he planned to rob, fatally shooting Hubbard in a parking lot.

"I want to lower the crime rate and improve life there," she said.

Greg Denton, AHA interim director, nominated Miller, who attends Bread of Life Fellowship Church where he is pastor.

"She is really smart and will bring a lot to the board," Denton said. "She is out there in the development. She has conversations with the residents about their needs, and she will bring them to the meetings and share them" with the board.

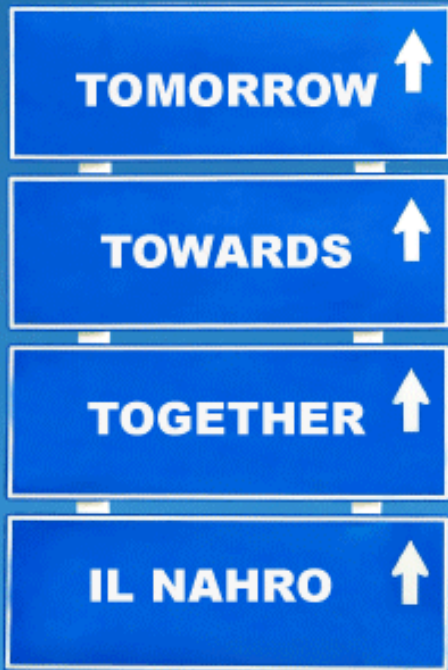
In the letter Denton wrote Walker, he said of Miller: "She is a dependable resident with impeccable character and integrity."

Miller, who has lived in Oakwood Estates for nine years, now is the sole resident commissioner, as was Harris. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires authorities governing its housing units to have a resident commissioner.

Miller said she did not know Harris, who lived in the complex in the 700 block of Oakwood Road.

The next AHA meeting will be on Oct. 6, unless it is rescheduled.

Reach Linda N. Weller at 618-208-6450 or on Twitter [@Linda\\_Weller](https://twitter.com/Linda_Weller).



# Save the Date

IL NAHRO Annual Conference

**August 17-19, 2016**

Radisson Hotel  
Rockford, IL

## Section 8 residents claim private security company harasses them

By [Jonah Newman](#) | September 8, 2015



*Photo by Max Herman*

*Sheena Godfrey stands outside her home at the Concordia Place Apartments in Riverdale.*

When paramedics arrived, Jesse Bogan was still handcuffed to the wall, blood spurting from three gaping wounds in his left foot.

A German Shepherd named Demon had bitten

through his sneaker and held on to his foot for several minutes. Demon is a guard dog for A-Alert Security and Investigations, the private company hired to police Concordia Place Apartments, the subsidized housing complex on the Far South Side where Bogan grew up.

About 30 minutes before paramedics arrived, Ricky Martinez, the owner of the security company, had stopped Bogan and his friend as they were driving out of the development, according to a written account by Bogan. "Get the f\*\*\* out of the car," Martinez yelled three times after jumping out of a company SUV with his gun drawn. Soon, three more security guards arrived, pulled Bogan out of the passenger seat and took him to the security office, where they handcuffed him to a pole mounted on the wall.

That's when Martinez came back with Demon. The company said Bogan provoked the dog. But in a lawsuit, Bogan said the dog charged at him, urged on by Martinez and the other guards, who laughed as he was attacked. Afterward, Martinez and the guards left with the dog;

Bogan, bleeding, called 911.

The security company charged him with criminal trespassing. The charges were dropped when Martinez failed to appear in court.

Residents of Concordia Place, a 297-unit federally subsidized housing development, say the June 2013 incident is just one example of a pattern of harassment and overzealous policing by Martinez and his private security company.

In April 2015, 26 African-American residents and guests filed a federal lawsuit against Martinez, A-Alert, and DRE, Inc., which owns both the property and the management company, Promex Midwest. Bogan, now 31, and another former resident filed separate lawsuits accusing Martinez, A-Alert and the other defendants of using excessive force and conducting illegal searches and seizures. They allege that A-Alert's behavior amounts to racial discrimination and a violation of their civil rights.

Despite the three pending lawsuits, Martinez and A-Alert continue to patrol Concordia Place with military-style assault rifles and a guard dog, supported by taxpayer money from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which pays DRE, Inc. monthly rental subsidies of \$3 million per year, according to Dennis Egidi, the president of the company.

He said A-Alert is necessary to protect residents from gangs and drugs.

"We're not trying to create a police state or anything. We're just trying to make it safe for everybody," Egidi said. "These guys carry guns because the opposition carries guns."

Sarah Lampel, Promex's director of operations and compliance, declined to comment, as did Martinez, through his lawyer.

A HUD spokesman said the agency is conducting a management review of Concordia Place in response to complaints about A-Alert, but he wouldn't provide details, citing the lawsuits.

The situation raises concerns about the increasing use of private security companies to police public housing complexes across the city and whether HUD is lax in its oversight of the companies.

The residents' allegations paint a consistent and troubling picture of how Martinez and A-Alert guards treat them and their guests:

- They wear bullet proof vests and carry assault rifles, handguns and Tasers, which they aim at residents and visitors.
- They ban guests from the property without cause and, often, without informing them that they've been barred. When the guests return, they

physically detain them and have them charged with criminal trespassing.

- As recently as Aug. 21, a dozen A-Alert security guards set up a checkpoint at Concordia Place and stopped every car they didn't recognize to ask drivers for ID and the reason for their visit, even cars driven by residents.
- Many of the incidents take place at night or on weekends, when the on-site management office is closed and no one is there to hear complaints.
- A-Alert often refuses to investigate when residents inform the company about criminal activity.
- When residents complain to management about A-Alert, they say their concerns are ignored.

Concordia Place is part of HUD's Section 8 Housing Assistance Program, which subsidizes developments that rent to very low-income families. The subsidies are based on how much rent each tenant can afford but, unlike Housing Choice Vouchers, are tied to the development, not to individual tenants. If a resident moves, she loses her rental assistance. As a result, some tenants are hesitant to complain to management or join the lawsuit because they fear being evicted and left with nowhere to go, some residents say.

Housing experts and lawyers say the way the Section 8 system is set up makes it easy for management and owners to intimidate and ignore the concerns of low-income residents.

"In subsidized properties, your voucher is very hard to come by and very easy to lose," said Paul Burns, an organizer with the Metropolitan Tenants Organization who helped renters at Concordia Place form a tenants association in June.

HUD has the power to withhold rent payments from



*Photo by Max Herman*

*The sign at the entrance of Concordia Place Apartments seen through a chain link fence.*

property owners who don't provide "decent, safe and sanitary housing," but they rarely use it, housing experts say.

Jerry Brown, a Washington-based spokesman for the housing agency, said, "I can say without a shadow of a doubt, HUD is taking action. Whenever there are complaints voiced by tenants in cases that are similar to this, HUD takes action."

Residents say they hope HUD acts quickly, because they are desperate for relief from Martinez and the other A-Alert security guards.

"I pray to God to get me up out of here before next summer," said Deborah Lewis, who has lived at Concordia Place for more than 14 years, her voice breaking. "Because I can't live like this."

### Security company makes residents feel unsafe

At first glance, Concordia Place looks idyllic. A small road encircles more than two dozen two- and three-story brown and white apartment buildings. Sidewalks cut through manicured lawns between buildings like paths navigating through a college campus.

It looks like an oasis in the industrial wasteland of Riverdale, Chicago's poorest and most isolated community area, on the city's southern edge. Across the street from Concordia sits the entrance to one of Chicago's wastewater treatment facilities. Riverdale's 7,000 residents have a median income of less than \$14,000, according to the most recent Census data. In 2010, 45 percent of the area's buildings [were vacant](#), the highest rate in the city.

"It's a very difficult part of town," said Egidi, who visits the property about twice a year.

Before A-Alert was hired, the security cameras at Concordia Place were shot out, he said.

"I'd be the first one in the world to have no security and save \$275,000 a year," he said.

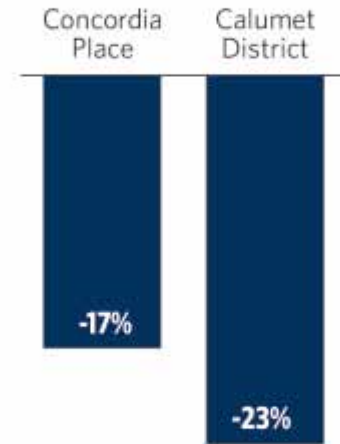
But current and former resident say Concordia Place has always been a relatively safe place to live.

"Concordia has never been a violent place. Never," said Sheena Godfrey, a resident for 13 years, who is 8 months pregnant.

She said A-Alert has made it more dangerous to live there, not less.

## Crime at Concordia

Index crimes, which are used by the FBI to track the overall crime rate, fell less at Concordia in the three years A-Alert has worked there than they did in the rest of the Calumet District, where the complex is located.



Note: Index crimes include various types of theft, burglary, assault, rape and homicide. Used three-year averages to minimize the effect of outlier years.

Source: Chicago Police Department; analyzed by The Chicago Reporter

**THE CHICAGO  
REPORTER**

Graphic by Christine Wachter

*Index crimes dropped less from 2008-10 to 2012-14 at Concordia Place than in the Calumet District. (Click to enlarge)*

Last year, when an ex-boyfriend tried to break into her apartment while she was home, Godfrey called the security office for help; they told her to call the Chicago Police Department instead, she said. A-Alert officers also have been seen speeding their Blue Chevy Tahoe across the development's grassy lawns, where children play, Godfrey and other residents say. Security officers hit her parked car in January 2014 while pursuing someone, Godfrey said.

"They'll pick and choose" which crimes to pursue, she said, often focusing on seemingly minor infractions. One night in March, Martinez mistook Godfrey's cell phone flashlight for its video camera, which he thought she was using to film him and other A-Alert security guards as they searched another resident's car. A management company rule prohibits tenants from photographing or filming security guards; a violation could result in eviction.

Martinez threatened at the time to cite her for a lease violation, tow her brother's Jeep and "ban each and every one" of her visitors and guests, she said. A few weeks later, Martinez seemed to make good on

his promise. He barred from the property Godfrey's boyfriend, who helps support her and her children and is the father of her unborn baby.

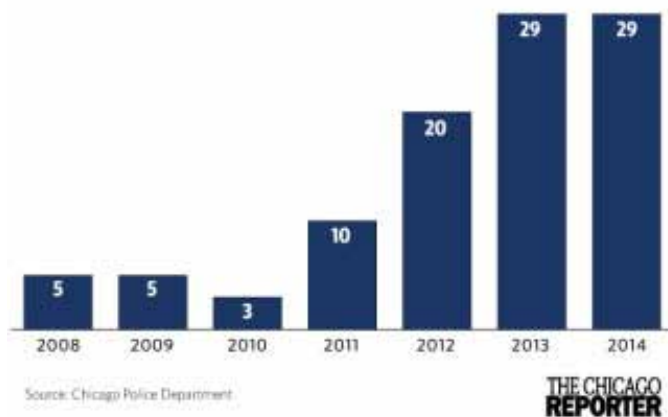
Godfrey, a plaintiff in the tenant lawsuit, said it took her months to get a meeting with the property manager to find out why he was barred. The manager told Godfrey in July that her boyfriend was barred because he didn't have a driver's license and his car wasn't registered, she said. Godfrey doesn't understand why that should be a reason to ban someone from the property.

"A common sense person can tell you that there is such a lack of criminal activity out here, what he's doing out here is he's trying to make them needed," she said about Martinez. "He's trying to prove [to management] that, 'See, you guys gotta keep us out here because we're fighting this crime.'"

An analysis of crime data from the Chicago Police Department shows that "index crimes" like theft, assault, burglary and homicides have declined at Concordia Place since A-Alert started in October 2011, but not as much as they've gone down in the Calumet District overall, where Concordia Place is located.

### **Trespassing calls up**

The number criminal trespassing crimes reported at Concordia Place jumped tenfold from 2010, the year before A-Alert began patrolling, to 2014.



Graphic by Christine Wachter

Number of criminal trespass crimes reported by year at Concordia Place Apartments. (Click to enlarge)

One crime is up sharply at Concordia Place since A-Alert was hired: Criminal trespassing complaints, many of them initiated by A-Alert, have skyrocketed at the property from three in 2010 to 29 in 2014.

Banning residents' loved ones or—worse—having them criminally charged, has had a profound impact on their lives. Godfrey, who doesn't have a car, now relies on friends and family for transportation to doctor's appointments, to pick up her kids from school and to go to the grocery store. She has missed several doctors' appointments because she couldn't find someone to give

her a ride, she said. Some friends and family members say they avoid going to Concordia Place because of concerns about being harassed, barred or charged with trespassing.

"We keep people out, we're not disputing that," Egidi said. "I'm not there, but the guards are there, and there's a reason for it. They're not keeping them out because they want to come in and pray."

Seventy-five residents signed a petition last summer asking Promex Midwest, the complex's management company, to fire A-Alert.

"A-Alert treats us with no dignity or respect. For example referring to female tenants as black bitches and crack head whores, and referring to our children as retards," the residents wrote in their petition. "We have now become afraid for our lives and our children's lives. We refuse to see another Tra[y]von Martin situation!!! This kind of treatment is inhumane and will no longer be tolerated!"

They said they received no response.

**"A big huge mess"**

Incidents between A-Alert guards and residents can quickly dissolve into a game of he said-she said. In documents obtained by The Reporter, Martinez and Promex have painted residents as aggressors and instigators.

Take one example from the Saturday before Easter. A resident had a party that, her neighbors say, was so quiet that other residents in the building didn't even know it was going on. Most of the visitors were elderly family members. A-Alert guards saw an unusually large number of cars in the parking lot and tried to figure out where the gathering was, said Yolanda Walker, a neighbor.

"The next thing we know, all of his guys start rushing up the stairs, dragging people, slamming people [into the bannisters]," said Walker, president of the tenant's association.

"A woman had to be taken out in an ambulance, people were crying, it was a big huge mess," Walker said. "And with all of that, there was not one arrest."

Sarah Lampel, director of operations and compliance for Promex Midwest, told an entirely different story in an email to Qwanchaize Edwards, director of legislative affairs and communications for 9<sup>th</sup> ward Ald. Anthony Beale, who had reached out to management on behalf of the tenants.

She said close to 100 people were at the party, and many were drinking outside. When security "respectfully" reminded them of the rules against drinking in common areas, she wrote, "They became extremely aggressive towards security, behavior which

including cursing, threats of violence and physically charging at the security officers.”

She said the incident was “a perfect example of why we are not only grateful for A-Alert as our security company, but also for the way they conduct themselves on the property.”

“As you receive calls from residents, please keep in mind you are receiving only half of a story,” she told Edwards.

Martinez’s accounts of such incidents sometimes shift.

His version of what happened on a crisp night in May 2014 changed several times, according to court records. What is indisputable is that Martinez and another guard saw two teenagers walking on Concordia Place grounds. When the teens saw security coming, they ran. Martinez and his partner chased after Denon Oglesby, a 19-year-old Concordia resident, in their SUV, before catching him and handcuffing him.

According to the police report, Martinez told CPD officers that he saw Oglesby look in his direction and then run, holding his side as if he had a weapon, and then drop a gun on the ground. Martinez’s written report, which A-Alert guards are required to make of every incident, made no mention of the teenager holding his side, according to court testimony.

Then, in a preliminary court hearing, Martinez said that Oglesby “reached into his pants, took out what I saw to be a firearm, and threw it on the ground.”

But when he testified at Oglesby’s trial, he said the teenager threw something against the wall of a building, which made a loud sound like metal hitting brick. At the time he couldn’t see what the object was, he said.

Oglesby was charged with six counts of aggravated unlawful use of a weapon, a felony. After hearing Martinez’s testimony, a Cook County judge found Oglesby not guilty on all six counts based on his conclusion that the prosecution presented insufficient evidence.

*Photo by Max Herman*

*A view of Concordia Place Apartments in Riverdale.*

### **The man behind A-Alert**

Martinez is at the center of most disputes involving A-Alert.

He dreamed of becoming a police officer since he was a teenager.

Soon after he came to the United States at age 17 from his native Morocco in 1988, he began working toward that goal. (He changed his name from Zouheir Rahmani when he became a U.S. citizen in 2001.) Starting around 1994, he applied at least eight times to at least five different police departments, including Houston, Los Angeles, Bridgeview and Chicago. He applied three times to the Chicago Police Department between 1999 and 2006.

“I think I have a lot to offer to Chicago Police Department,” he said in February 2009, after he had been rejected from CPD for the third time. “I’m not the best, but I know if I get good training, I can become the best.”

He was rejected based on several marks on his record, including his 1991 arrest for aggravated assault for allegedly trying to hit a traffic aide with his taxi. He was sentenced to court supervision.

He sued the department, alleging that he was discriminated against because he is Muslim and Arab. A federal judge ruled in favor of CPD after finding that Martinez failed to present evidence of discrimination.

In March 2003, Martinez began work as a part-time security guard and supervisor for A-Alert II Security-N-Guard Services, according to his CPD application. One of his supervisory responsibilities was to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation.

But he didn’t receive his state license or firearm training until 2005, according to state records.

In January 2004, A-Alert was placed on probation and fined \$750 by IDFPR for employing nine people who did not have active state licenses, including one person who had never applied for one.

By September 2011, records show, Martinez had taken over A-Alert II and changed the name to A-Alert Security Services, Inc. That month, Martinez signed a security guard services contract with Concordia Place as A-Alert’s president. By signing the contract, Martinez represented that A-Alert was “fully licensed and authorized to provide all of the services required of it.”

The problem is that Martinez didn’t receive his state private security contractor license, which permits a licensed security guard with at least three years of



experience to run a security guard agency, until April 2012, state records show. Moreover, A-Alert Security Services, which also goes by the name A-Alert Security and Investigations, wasn't licensed as its own private security agency until May 2012.

### **Private security, public housing**

State regulation of the private security industry is minimal. A licensed armed security guard in Illinois has to submit to a background check and go through just 40 hours of training: 20 hours of basic instruction and 20 hours of firearms training. The basic instruction includes information on use of force, arrest techniques, civil and criminal laws for private security guards and fire prevention.

The ranks of private security companies are growing rapidly. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were nearly 980,000 private security guards in the U.S. in 2014, or about three private guards for every two federal, state and local law enforcement officers.

"The phenomenon of privatization is an unstoppable train," said Charles Nemeth, an expert in private security who chairs the department of Security, Fire and Emergency Management at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "The public sector is contracting and the private sector is expanding."

One area ripe for private security is public and subsidized housing, Nemeth said.

"That was one of the earliest entry points for the private security companies," he said. "You know why they are in low-income housing developments? Because the housing police were pathetically terrible, they have never done a good job."

The Chicago Housing Authority Police Department was disbanded in 1999. Most public and subsidized

housing developments in Chicago now have private security companies, and many of them have serious problems, according to housing advocates.

"I think there's no one good security company," said Kate Walz, director of housing justice at the Shriver National Center on Poverty Law in Chicago. "It's just a choice of evils."

Most of the complaints she hears from tenants at subsidized housing developments are that security is too lax and ineffective.

One of the problems, experts say, is that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development doesn't monitor subcontractors at developments where they subsidize rents. HUD did not respond to questions about the amount of the contract at Concordia Place.

HUD's Real Estate Assessment Center conducts inspections of properties every three years, or more regularly if problems are found. Inspectors look only at physical issues like plumbing, insects and garbage disposal. They don't evaluate security companies or their practices.

Residents say Martinez and his company have turned Concordia Place into a de-facto prison.

"I feel like a target, an inmate," Godfrey said. These days, she rarely stays at Concordia Place. She and her kids have been staying with her boyfriend or with relatives, sometimes sleeping on a couch or the floor.

"I feel so trapped when I go there," she said. "I'd just rather not be home."

*This story has been updated.*

*Are you or someone you know experiencing problems with a security company at a local public housing complex? If so, contact reporter Jonah Newman at [jnewman@chicagoreporter.com](mailto:jnewman@chicagoreporter.com).*



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