

Getting Smart

BY WALTER L. SMART
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COMMUNITY POWER

There is no simple or utopian solution to the complex problem of housing. Key to a solution is, however, the government's taking active steps to substantially reduce the widespread abuse and misuse of housing subsidy programs. One way to end such misuse is the active involvement of citizens at the neighborhood level.

As long as speculative builders and developers are invited, urged to otherwise encouraged to build or rehabilitate housing for the poor and near poor, and particularly if the target population is part of a minority group, widespread abuse and misuse of housing subsidy programs will continue.

It should be immediately obvious that the key interest group, the consumer, is totally left out of such an arrangement.

Furthermore, the arrangement wherein a builder-developer "hustles" a local church to front as a sponsor does not in any way change the original premise.

Most, if not all, neighborhoods have a concerned group of residents who are vitally interested in local housing conditions and are motivated to act (without pay) on behalf of their community.

What government has failed to realize is the absolute necessity of giving community leadership adequate tools with realistic objectives. Many who criticize the granting of power to community people fail to note that more times than not citizens are poorly trained and given inadequate tools and funding to complete the desired job.

Our experience in settlements indicates that it is necessary to provide ongoing professional supportive staff assistance to neighborhood organizations if constructive, sustained efforts are to be realized.

Within neighborhoods where housing is being abandoned, locally based agencies have lacked the tools to bring the problem under control. Thus, the blighting influence of the abandoned building spreads and intensifies the existing level of neighborhood deterioration.

Our experience also indicates that there are a substantial number of landlords who are seeking opportunities to "bail out" of ghetto neighborhoods. Most cities have refrained from using code enforcement powers against such landlords for fear of causing wholesale abandonment. No public interest is served by giving financial incentives to encourage a different attitude and different behavior of landlords. By so doing, the money is largely wasted. Cosmetic repairs are made but the attitudes and behavior are unchanged.

We need some means through which there can be an orderly transference of ownership from landlord to responsible local neighborhood corporations.

There have been numerous occasions, particularly with large scale rehabilitation programs (operation rehabilitation) when basically sound units were given cosmetic repairs, driving the rental cost substantially beyond the local resident's ability to pay. Why should it be necessary for all rehabilitated units to have new bathrooms and new kitchens if the present ones are serviceable? If the cost of rehabilitation were reduced to \$1,500 or \$2,000 per unit, the rental cost and federal subsidy would be substantially reduced.

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Community Alcoholism Program

Help for alcoholics and their families at the neighborhood level is the work of Helen Hutchinson and Louise Robertson, and it's also what they'll discuss with KORK TV 3's John Howe, on "Community Camera," Saturday, July 14, at 6:30 PM. The two counselors are in charge of the Community Alcoholism Program Centers in North Las Vegas and West Las Vegas. Appearing with them will be Dr. C.F. Mynatt, of the Cedarbrook Detoxification Center. They will talk about how help is given to persons suffering from alcoholism.

The same program will include appearances by Father Louis Vitale of the Las Vegas Franciscan Center, and a member of the Seventh Step Foundation, an organization of former convicts, helping each other adjust to community life.

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