

Afterschool Programs in Affordable Housing Communities

By Sam Piha, *Temescal Associates*

Introduction

A growing number of families with school age children reside in affordable housing settings. Many of these intentional communities have access to afterschool programs provided by resident service organizations. Housing-based afterschool programs for children and youth represent the third place for afterschool programs, following those that are operated within public schools and the community.

Below, in Part I, we provide a brief overview of affordable housing communities and explain why in many cases these settings are the best places to offer afterschool programs to low-income families. We offer a number of comments based on our interviews with several leaders of resident service organizations who support afterschool programming.

We follow this overview with Part II, which focuses on one resident service organization, Hope Through Housing Foundation (“Hope”), and take a close look at their efforts to provide quality afterschool programs. In Part III, we profile an individual afterschool program serving youth on one Hope property.

It is essential that we shine a light on the importance of youth programming within these settings, which have previously been overshadowed by afterschool programs located in public schools and community-based settings.

What is Affordable Housing?

Housing is considered affordable when rent and utility costs are no more than 30% of a household's income.¹ However, over the last three decades, the percentage of family income dedicated to housing has greatly escalated.



This has created a cost burden for families, making it difficult to afford other necessities such as food, clothing, transportation and medical care.

“An estimated 12 million renter and homeowner households now pay more than 50 percent of their annual incomes for housing, and a family with one full-time worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford the local fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the United States. The lack of affordable housing is a significant hardship for low-income households preventing them from meeting their other basic needs, such as nutrition and healthcare, or saving for their future and that of their families.”²

In response to the growing cost of housing, the federal government and individual cities and states have taken measures to ensure that affordable housing is available to low and moderate income families through the preservation and building of affordable housing units and the development of affordable housing communities.



Who Lives in Affordable Housing?

Residents in affordable housing include working families, some of whom are young couples starting a family while relying on a single income, or relationship breakups resulting in one household becoming two.¹ They include families living on unemployment, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI).¹ All residents are considered low to moderate income.

About Affordable Housing Resident Service Organizations

Many affordable housing communities have access to services offered by non-profit resident service organizations. In addition to early childcare and senior services, many of these organizations offer housing-based afterschool programs for the children and youth who reside in the community. George Searcy, Executive Director of Hope Through Housing

added, “Because we offer a range of social services in these settings, residents benefit by the convenience and safety of accessing them onsite.”

Below is a description of a handful of resident service organizations that support afterschool programs. It should be noted that in addition to those we describe, there are many organizations that offer resident services and afterschool programs in affordable housing communities across the country.

Hope Through Housing Foundation

Hope provides services to affordable housing residents that are focused on improving the social and economic climate of neighborhoods vulnerable to the effects of crime, blight, poor school performance and the effects of generations of poverty. Hope contributes to community vitality through three major initiatives: Early Childhood Education, Youth Development (Afterschool Programs), and Senior Wellness. Hope provides services to

more than 30,000 families and seniors in 73 communities in California, Texas and Arkansas. For more information, go to: www.hthf.org

The NHP Foundation

The NHP Foundation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making investments that preserve and create affordable multifamily housing for low- to moderate-income families and seniors. NHP also provides a comprehensive array of programs and services to enhance the quality of life for its residents. These include afterschool programs for young children and older youth.

NHP has 22 properties in 10 states, totaling approximately 5,000 affordable housing units. Afterschool programming for youth from pre-K to age 18 are offered at properties in Louisiana, Texas, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. NHP also provides its residents with health and wellness programs that emphasize athleticism and cultural enrichment, and educational workshops for first-time homebuyers. For more information, go to: www.nhpfoundation.org

AHC

AHC Inc. is a nonprofit developer of affordable housing in the mid-Atlantic region that provides quality homes for low- and moderate-income families. Created in 1975, AHC has 32 properties with more than 4,100 affordable apartments. AHC also offers a variety of programs, including homeownership opportunities and home improvement services for low- and moderate-income homeowners; and services for residents, including afterschool programs, tutoring and adult workshops. For more information, go to: www.ahcinc.org

NeighborWorks America

NeighborWorks America creates opportunities for people to live in affordable homes in safe, sustainable neighborhoods that are healthy places for families to grow. NeighborWorks has 235 independent, community-based nonprofit organizations in its network, serving more than 4,500 communities nationwide. Together with its national and local partners, NeighborWorks provides grants, programmatic support, training and technical assistance to its national network. For more information, go to: www.nw.org





Children and Families Who Reside in Affordable Housing Communities

Families in affordable housing communities are in many ways no different than other families that face the challenges of limited incomes. “When you have lots of families with tight incomes, there is an environment where more parents have less education, are working more jobs, and don’t speak English as their first language. Often you find that parents are less able to support their children in succeeding in school,” said Frances Ferguson of NeighborWorks America. Many of these families do not have the resources to purchase books or computers for the home. This was reinforced by Hope Through Housing’s finding that less than 50% of families have a computer and working internet access in their households.

“Because their parents often are struggling to make ends meet, young people in these settings often take on extra responsibilities at home, such as caring for younger siblings, doing the laundry, or working after school,” said Jennifer Endo of AHC, Inc.

These youth also tend to face problems at home and school. According to Susan Neufeld, Director of Youth Development Services at Hope Through Housing Foundation, “Although we don’t have data for this, based on my experience in child development, many of our kids are faced with learning challenges, undiagnosed special needs, impulse control issues, and behavioral/emotional issues.” Laura Fitzpatrick, Program Coach for Hope Through Housing Foundation added, “Many of these

youth have risk factors associated with the later abuse of alcohol and other drugs, gang involvement, and other challenges.”

Afterschool Program Structure

The structure of afterschool programs in affordable housing settings is highly variable, depending on the size of the property and the available resources. Programs operate anywhere from 2 to 5 days per week and their offerings range from tutoring and homework help to a multitude of enrichment and academic activities.

Among the programs that we examined, there are a number of commonalities. All of the programs invest in staff development, emphasize academic outcomes, and use evaluation to gauge their progress.

Staff Development: Staff development and training is a large part of Hope Through Housing’s commitment to quality. Youth development trainings for all staff take place once per month, with coaching and site observations occurring each week.

NHP also offers training to its staff in youth development and curriculum to ensure quality programming. “Our staff are trained on youth development and project-based learning once a month at each NHP afterschool program location,” Christopher Bentivegna, Assistant National Director of Resident Services at NHP Foundation explained. All staff attend these monthly meetings, and all new staff members participate in a longer training on youth development, project-based learning, and Virtual Vacation (a curriculum developed by Bentivegna).

Endo explained how AHC works to ensure quality programming. “We do staff training around literacy four to five times per year with Arlington Public Schools and other local educators. We also do peer observations, where staff visit other sites and provide feedback using a rubric.”



Endo noted that to account for staff turnover, they repeat peer observations and youth development training on an as needed basis.

Partnering with Outside Organizations: Both NHP and Hope partner with numerous outside nonprofit organizations to strengthen the diversity of programming. NeighborWorks America has “partnered with schools we primarily serve by bringing teachers into our programs as paid literacy tutors,” said Ferguson. AHC also partners with outside groups to strengthen program quality, including a group that offers drama workshops, a group that reads and donates books to youth, 4-H, and Arlington Public Schools.

Promoting Academic Outcomes: The main focus of the K-5 program at AHC is to get all participants on reading level by 5th grade. To do this, they assess participants' reading levels at the beginning of the year and have hired two tutors to work one on one with the youth reading below grade level, said Endo.

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Hope focuses on literacy by implementing the KidzLit curriculum and measuring young people's literacy skills and academic self-efficacy. NHP programs work with an educational specialist to conduct pre and post tests in math and literacy, and then develop an individual learning plan for the year, said Bentivegna. He noted that NHP programs also offer "exploration stations," places for youth to use manipulatives and books to explore math and literacy concepts. Stations are tailored to each child based on their grade level expectation.

As stated above, NeighborWorks partners with local schools to utilize credentialed teachers as literacy tutors. Ferguson noted that NeighborWorks programs also use school readiness assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of their reading programs.

Evaluation: Neufeld described Hope Through Housing's evaluation, which focuses on program quality, program outputs and outcomes, and ongoing program improvement. This consists of the SACERS site observations, documentation of site visits, surveys of parents/guardians, teachers, afterschool staff, and youth participants. Hope also assesses young people's sense of academic self-efficacy.



“We are beginning to rate sites on their fidelity to a number of curricula, including KidzLit and PeaceBuilders. We are also assessing youth participants’ reading literacy skills across time,” Neufeld noted. She explained that this information is then used to influence program quality improvement, inform stakeholders and funders, and raise funding for program.

Bentivegna explained that the afterschool programs in New Orleans offered through NHP were subject to evaluation by the Freddie Mac Foundation since they are entirely funded by Freddie Mac. For the entirety of the grant (3 years), the program sites met or exceeded Freddie Mac’s goals.

Unique Advantages of Housing-Based Afterschool Programs

Youth programs in affordable housing communities offer a number of unique advantages to youth and their families.

Improved Access and Safety: Because the afterschool programs are offered where they live, there is no need for working parents to arrange transportation to and from programs and activities for their children. This is particularly important for parents who are reliant on public transportation and those who are surrounded by neighborhoods they deem as unsafe. Because the afterschool programs are located onsite they are considered to be more safe and convenient than outside programs. Another advantage is the fact that these programs operate year-round and during school holidays – a fact that is essential to working parents. Additionally, these programs are offered at no cost to the families. Endo (AHC) noted, “These programs are very convenient for families...there

Close Relationships with Youth and Families: “Another advantage is the close relationship that can be developed between afterschool program staff and youth families,” Bentivegna (NHP) said.



“We see parents in a variety of resident services programs and around the property, which often makes the parent more open and honest toward us. This allows us to focus on each child and know what’s going on in his or her life. Relationships like this can’t be developed in a school-based setting.”

According to Ken White, Managing Director of Resident Services at NHP Foundation, the programs are unique in that they build a sense of community among the youth. “There is a sense of familiarity among the youth in the program, which is an absolute benefit to them,” he said.

Afterschool staff in housing settings have greater access to and knowledge of families. This includes family changes that can have significant impact on young people. Neufeld (Hope) stated that in addition to the knowledge acquired by the afterschool staff, property management are often aware of when a family is experiencing a challenging time. This information can be shared in confidence with the program staff, allowing them to offer resources and referrals to the struggling family and better support the youth.

Community Learning: White (NHP) believes that by offering a quality academic and enrichment program onsite, they are sending the message to young people that “learning goes beyond the classroom. You can actually read books and learn in the place you live. That’s life-long learning.”



Fitzpatrick (Hope) echoed White’s sentiments. “Many of our youth have mixed attitudes about school. We have the advantage of serving them in a location that doesn’t feel like school, and the learning becomes fun,” she said.

Community Benefits: These afterschool programs also benefit the immediate housing community. White (NHP) noted that when compared to affordable housing properties that don’t offer youth programs, those that do experience less property destruction and youth getting into trouble. “As property owners, we are protecting our assets when the kids are engaged in a program,” White said.

Potential Benefits: Placing afterschool programs in the boundaries of affordable housing communities holds great potential for youth within these settings. These programs have the potential to build social capital and be an opening to connect those who are unconnected to larger community networks. These networks could include other civic and community institutions such as community colleges and universities, science and technology centers, civic groups, and workforce programs. These connections could provide affordable housing residents, particularly the youth, with larger social connections in the community, and in turn, might lead to avenues of employment, career, and college.

Employment within the afterschool program could provide part time jobs to residents and/or older youth, which in turn might lead to career ladders in fields such as teaching and recreation. If the afterschool program is located next to adult training or recreation facilities or a community technology center, this might lead to stronger intergenerational connections for the youth, increasing social capital and connections in the affordable housing neighborhood.

Housing-based afterschool programs could be tied to service projects that benefit the affordable housing site or the residents. Programs could help with a community garden or help organize cultural events and family nights, all of which add to the social ties within the neighborhood.

Challenges

Despite the advantages cited above, the providers of these programs face a number of challenges. Below we describe some of these challenges.

Program Cost and Funding: Operating these programs can be costly, and finding sustainable funding and appropriate space can be a real challenge. According to Endo (AHC), “the cost is high because the work is labor intensive, and to keep quality staff, we must compete with teacher salaries.”

Bentivegna (NHP) noted that finding funding for housing-based afterschool programs is challenging for a number of reasons. “There currently exists an emphasis on school-based programs. Funders often don’t know how our programs are different from school-based ones, thus are less likely to be interested in them.” He also said that because they don’t operate in the schools, they are constantly needing to prove their ability to improve academic and youth outcomes.

School Collaboration: Bentivegna stated that because schools have their own programs, they are often less willing to collaborate with the housing community programs. This presents a challenge for afterschool staff who want to obtain school data on youth who would benefit from close case management.

Assessment and Accountability Metrics: Ferguson (NeighborWorks) noted that the biggest challenge for afterschool programs is running a program without metrics. “This way is not as powerful as running a program with accountable metrics that people can understand what they are investing in,” she said. Schools have specific assessment tools for reading that are not common to afterschool programs.

Youth with Special Needs: Fitzpatrick (Hope) said that one of the biggest challenges her staff face is working with youth who have special needs and emotional issues. The staff participate in trainings dealing with these behaviors, but it is an issue that remains prevalent.

Family Involvement: Family involvement can also present a challenge, said Neufeld (Hope). “It can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, we get to know parents well and they are involved in the programs. But this can lead to some parents taking the program for granted - feeling like it’s a service amenity and they don’t need to communicate with the youth workers. They sometimes see us as having less weight and authority when compared to the schools.” Another challenge involved parents or guardians withholding participation of their child in the afterschool program as a punishment for misbehavior within the home or school. According to Hope’s evaluation findings, 22% of parents reported that they prevented their child from attending the program as a form of punishment.

Serving the Needs of Older Youth: Similar to the larger afterschool movement, housing-based afterschool programs are most successful in serving younger children who are dependent on adult supervision after school and on school holidays. These programs often attract a handful of older youth, but serving the needs of a very broad age range of youth within a single program poses challenges to those who are designing and implementing their programs. Because older youth can “vote with their feet,” their participation is often short lived. Thus, they require activities that address their unique developmental needs.



Implications and Recommendations

Policymakers & Youth Advocates

Afterschool programs within housing communities are very much under the radar of policymakers and funders. It is important that efforts are made to educate these stakeholders and highlight the unique benefits of afterschool programs operating within affordable housing communities. This can be done by profiling successful programs in written documents highlighting the effectiveness of these programs using relevant evaluation data, and inviting policymakers and funders to visit these programs. These visits can include the observation of afterschool activities and meeting with family residents and youth.

Policy advocates can also work to eliminate barriers faced by housing-based afterschool providers as they seek to access afterschool funding. These efforts can be taken up by national advocacy organizations, such as the Afterschool Alliance, as well as those that operate at the state and local levels. This will require raising the visibility of these programs through the increased activity of affordable housing organizations and program leaders.

Program Provider Organizations

It is important to note that while the programs we describe place an emphasis on program quality, there is a great deal of inconsistency in program quality across provider organizations. Thus, it is important that provider organizations that operate within housing communities invest in building the quality of their programs. This includes promoting the development of their staff, ensuring that programs are well planned, and making use of evidence-based program curricula and program evaluation.

It is essential that organization leaders and funders understand that quality costs. This means ensuring that efforts to improve program quality are supported by real budget line items and by providing staff with adequate time to design their program and plan and prepare their activities.



To accomplish this, funders need to be educated about the resources that are required to ensure program quality.

Afterschool programs in these settings have great potential to engage older youth and offer part-time employment opportunities, which can lead to career ladders in teaching or recreation, and connect them to broader community networks. Developing and implementing these programs requires the hiring of staff who are experienced in working with older youth and who are well connected to community resources and networks.

Housing-based provider organizations tend to be isolated from the larger afterschool movement. Organization and program leaders should make an effort to join with other afterschool providers at existing afterschool conferences, which are held at the national, regional, and local levels.

Further, they should attempt to join leadership forums related to afterschool programs and offer presentations and training sessions on their effective use of program tools and strategies.

They should also participate in advocacy efforts to educate and influence policymakers and funders. Lastly, the leaders of affordable housing service providers should gather together with their peers to promote the sharing of practice and develop strategies to educate and influence policymakers.

Youth Workers and Practitioners

It is the job of afterschool program leaders and youth workers to improve their programs and direct practice with young people. This can be accomplished through effective staff training, sharing effective practices with other afterschool programs, and applying the use of new strategies and tools. While program development is the job of program leaders and those who work directly with the youth, it must be supported by the larger organizations that oversee these programs.



About the Author

Since 2007, Sam Piha has served as founder and principal of *Temescal Associates*. Sam began his career in 1974 as an afterschool worker, an experience that led to 13 years of classroom teaching and work as a child and family counselor and school social worker. Between 1989 and 2006, Sam managed school-based youth programs at the regional and national levels. He served as editor and contributing author of several important practice guides and journal articles on afterschool programming. Sam holds a Masters Degree in Social Welfare and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

About Temescal Associates

Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. Temescal Associates' clients include leaders of youth serving institutions and organizations, school and youth program practitioners, public and private funders, intermediary organizations, and policy makers. For more information, go to: www.temescalassociates.com

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This paper was made possible by funding from the Hope Through Housing Foundation. Hope Through Housing provides services to affordable housing residents that are focused on improving the social and economic climate of neighborhoods vulnerable to the effects of crime, blight, poor school performance and the effects of generations of poverty. Hope contributes to community vitality through three major initiatives: Early Childhood Education, Youth Development (Afterschool Programs), and Senior Wellness. Hope provides services to more than 30,000 families and seniors in 73 communities in California, Texas and Arkansas. For more information, go to: www.hthf.org.

Citations

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- ⁴ Sacramento Housing Alliance, www.sachousingalliance.org

Photos

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