



Officials, experts divided on housing

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GALVESTON — Galveston Housing Authority early last week released plans to rebuild all 569 public housing units demolished after Hurricane Ike on the same sites as the old developments.

Advocacy groups pushed for the one-for-one replacement, saying former residents deserved to have a place to come home to.

But rebuilding so much public housing in one neighborhood goes against nationwide policies that say families who need assistance should be spread throughout a community whenever possible to improve their chances of rising above the poverty level over time.

Housing authority officials said the agency will get more bang for its buck by building a few large multifamily developments, but housing experts said that approach may not be what's best for public housing residents.

Vestige Of Segregation

All four of Galveston's main public housing developments were built in the 1950s and 1960s within 4 miles of each other, when community leaders were only too happy to group poor and mostly African-American families on the city's north side, sandwiched between the industrial corridor and the main commercial thoroughfare.

Sociologists now acknowledge the concentration of public housing in most communities is a vestige of racial segregation, Betsy Julian, president of Dallas-based Inclusive Communities Project, said.

The new model for public housing seeks to deconcentrate poverty, she said.

"You basically want to integrate low-income families to give them a chance to be a part of different communities," Julian, whose organization helps low-income families find affordable housing, said.

The goal for public housing agencies today should be to figure out how not to replicate a bad idea from the past, she said.

If the design for public housing wasn't working before, don't go back and do it again, she said.

No Cure-All

Researchers have spent the past 30 years studying the results of government programs that give public housing residents vouchers and assistance to move to more affluent, safer and less racially segregated neighborhoods.

Studies have shown the families who move get instant relief from problems associated with safety, mental health and housing quality, Stefanie Deluca, an assistant professor in the Sociology Department at Johns Hopkins University, said.

Women and young girls benefit the most from moving out of public housing developments, mostly because they no longer worry so much about becoming victims of physical or sexual violence, Deluca said.

Federal policymakers had hoped the voucher programs would create economic and educational benefits as well, but the adults did not automatically get better jobs and the children did not do much better in school, Deluca said.

Even though study results show moving out of impoverished communities is not a cure-all, most experts still agree concentrated poverty is bad and officials have to make a strong case for moving families back into the public housing developments after they've already been moved involuntarily by the storm, she said.

"If the organization of the housing authority looks exactly the same, it's only better if the families are in dire situations now," she said.

Least Expensive, Most Expedient

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development policies promote a deconcentration of poverty and encourage mixed-income communities, Dominique Blom, deputy assistant secretary for the federal agency's Office of Public Housing Investments, said. The department provides some oversight and much of the funding to local housing authorities.

But the government subsidies provided to local housing authorities to maintain and build properties are the same for single and multifamily units, which makes it less expensive to build more concentrated developments than stand-alone, single-family homes.

Housing authority officials considered including more scattered site units in the rebuilding plan, but decided it would cost too much and take too long to buy properties throughout the city, board member Ray Lewis said.

The least expensive and fastest way to get people back to the island is to rebuild subsidized housing on land the housing authority already owns, he said.

Still Represented?

The scattered-site option also was unpopular among displaced housing authority residents, who wanted to come home, and leaders of the African-American community, who were afraid of losing the representation on city council gained through a 20-year-old federal lawsuit.

Galveston switched to single-member city council districts in 1993 as part of the lawsuit's settlement. The districts were supposed to help ensure the African-American community would have at least two seats on the city council, one elected from the district that includes all four public housing developments.

The majority of District 1's voting power came from the public housing developments, Leon Phillips, head of the Galveston County Coalition for Justice, said.

If the public housing was broken up, it would decrease the chances of having an African-American elected from that district, which also includes the more affluent downtown residential and commercial area.

"How do we retain the idea of what District 1 was set up for?" Phillips asked. "How would we maintain the integrity of the reason it was set up, with all of the people gone?"

Public Housing Versus Apartments

Scattered site housing also was unpopular among displaced housing authority residents who appealed to the agency to rebuild the communities many of them had called home all their lives.

The combined lobbying effort of political activists and distraught residents is an "unholy alliance" common in places where public housing is being restructured, Julian said.

"It takes some strong leadership in the community to stand up and say that's not what's best for the residents," she said.

But Phillips questioned claims that grouping families together in large developments was bad. No one is bothered by apartment complexes in other neighborhoods, which may include as many as 1,200 units, he said.

Public housing developments and apartment complexes are virtually the same, except for how they look, he said. People's opposition to the developments is about aesthetics, he said.

"What's the difference?" he asked. "The only difference is that they don't want it to look like barracks any more. They want it to look more modern."

Hoping For The Best

There's no reason the housing authority can't put some people back on the sites of the old developments, but leaders need to think about what's best for families who will be staying in public housing for the next 40 years, not just the families who were displaced by Ike, Julian said.

The emotional ties to the old neighborhoods are strong, but officials have to balance that with the overall benefit to all future residents, she said.

"I have seen people want to stay in environmentally degraded sites because that was the only home they ever knew," she said. "But from a public policy standpoint, you can't really argue for that credibly."

Ideally, the housing authority would spread the public housing out across the island, but Hurricane Ike didn't give the agency the five or 10 years it would take to do that, Lewis said.

The priority was to bring people back as quickly as possible, and the best way to do that was to rebuild on the same footprint, he said.

"Given the scenario we have in front of us, we hope we're doing the best for the residents and the city, with their input," he said.

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