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Key to Services in Affordable Housing: Listen to the Residents, Communicate Well

BRAD STANHOPE, SENIOR EDITOR, NOVOGRADAC

In each of the past four years, the development team behind the 1,600-unit Williamsburg Houses affordable housing property in Brooklyn offered \$5,000 scholarships for up to 15 residents. The recipients range in age and aspirations, but the Inspired Path Forward Scholarship program reflects a lesson learned in the wake of 2012's Superstorm Sandy by RDC Development, a joint venture between Wavcrest Management and MDG Design & Construction (MDG).

When RDC Development began rehabilitating the 24-building, 1,395-home Ocean Bay development after it was severely damaged by that massive hurricane, the developers assumed they knew what services should be offered to residents.

"We had a lot of ideas and a lot of things we wanted to bring in," said Matt Rooney, CEO of MDG and principal at RDC. "For adults at the complex, we were interested in economic mobility through job preparedness and computer literacy.

"But we realized pretty quickly that at Ocean Bay, while job training was important, these programs were not the primary concern of residents," Rooney said. "We came in wanting to emphasize computer literacy, but the residents' first response was, 'That's great, but I don't know what I'm going to eat [in the historic food desert of Far Rockaway] or how I can prepare in case of another storm.'"

It was an eye-opener for Rooney.

"I think Ocean Bay was a wake-up call and changed the way we approach residents' needs," Rooney said. "Now, we start by asking what's needed and what residents actually want."



Image: Courtesy of MDG and Group Gordon
Jen Jones is returning to school to study school psychology. The Williamsburg Houses resident's daughter also received a scholarship in 2025 and attends the University of Pittsburgh.

Big Developments, Significant Services

RDC Development worked with New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) on three major redevelopments, starting with Ocean Bay. They completed a \$225 million renovation of Betances Houses in the South Bronx in November 2020 and a \$492 million renovation of Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn in February 2025, all as part of the Permanent Affordability Commitment Together (PACT) program, which incorporates the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program.

Doing the renovation was a huge job. Providing services turned out to be just as important—and instructive.

St. Nicks Alliance, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit that works to improve the quality of life for low- and moderate-income residents through comprehensive community developments, provides services at Williamsburg Houses. Offerings include managing and developing more than 1,700 units of affordable housing, senior services, workforce skills training and job placement programs, and educational opportunities for a wide range of ages.

“Williamsburg Houses provides very stable housing and residents are very happy to have upgraded homes,” said Rolando Guzman, deputy director, community preservation for St. Nicks Alliance. “Our first priority is helping them maintain that housing. From there, we focus on connecting them with additional resources so they can achieve broader socio-economic outcomes.”

Jonathan Gouveia, executive vice president and chief estate officer at NYCHA, said services are a crucial part of the plan when NYCHA works with developers in the PACT program. “The primary driver of the work is the physical needs assessment,” said Gouveia. “To date, we have converted over 30,000 units and addressed \$10 billion capital need, but it’s not simply aesthetics: We’re getting into building systems, roofs, façades, plumbing, heating.”

It doesn’t end there.

“We believe that the physical rehabilitation is critically important and also believe that we have a number of different populations with pressing needs for robust social services programming. Both must be addressed as part of any project,” said Gouveia.

Scholarships as a ‘Trampoline’

Rooney said the Inspired Path Forward scholarships came out of residents’ needs and a bold vision.

“We really wanted to make a strong impression with residents and announce, ‘We’re here for you. You are our clients,’” said

Rooney. “We don’t want to just invest in buildings; we want to invest in the people who make it special. The scholarship is not just about traditional education. It includes trade schools and continuing education. We wanted to cast a wide net, so people could pursue the path that fits their goals.”

The effort hit early snags.

“When we started working with the program, the most applicants we saw was three. Last year, we had 36,” said Yadhira Deras, resident services coordinator at St. Nicks Alliance, focused on Williamsburg Houses. “Residents are engaging more now and really understanding the program. It’s not just for the children or young adults—adults can apply, too.”

Students can earn scholarships beginning in ninth grade and can reapply each year they’re eligible to accumulate funds. Adults can use the scholarships to go back to school, including college or vocational and technical programs, with the funds for tuition, books, room and board, school supplies and more. To operate the scholarship and select winners, RDC Development partners with Scholarship America, a third-party provider that reviews all applications holistically and independently to ensure program integrity.

The key to growth? Simple. “The major factor is word-of-mouth,” said Deras. “People started to tell others and we ramped up our marketing efforts.”

Rooney said things changed in Year 2.



Image: Courtesy of MDG and Group Gordon
Indira Smith, 20, lives in Williamsburg Houses and received a scholarship to attend the University of Albany, where she majors in human services.

“Once the first-year scholarships were awarded and given out, it became real and created a snowball effect for more applications in our second year. Since then, the scholarship has only grown in popularity,” said Rooney.

There are ‘232 Flavors’ of Services

What constitutes services at affordable housing properties? Mark Shelburne, a housing policy consultant at Novogradac, said there’s a wide swath.

“The range is all the way from bingo nights and dances to borderline medical care and everything in between,” said Shelburne. “It entirely depends on what the owner is willing and able to do and what the state incentivizes. There’s no standard practice.”

Alexandra Nassau-Brownstone, the vice president of Resident Outcomes and Certified Organization for Resident Engagement and Services (CORES) certification program at Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future (SAHF), said that while resident services may vary widely depending on the community, there are many standardized best practices for how organizations approach the work to ensure services are informed by resident priorities and impact-driven. Many of these standards have been incorporated as part of SAHF’s CORES certification program.

“There aren’t 31 flavors, there are 232 flavors,” Nassau-Brownstone said. “There’s no one-size-fits-all approach, but there are commonalities you see across populations supported and some coalescing in particular impact areas.

Housing stability is foundational to resident well-being, while layering of additional programs and services can make housing a platform to improve resident health, education, economic mobility and broader well-being. There isn’t a single key to success, but a combination of tailored resident engagements, programs and services.”

However, the most important step may be working with residents.

“Every community is different and you have to understand the neighborhood that’s already there,” said Nassau-Brownstone. “Who do residents trust? Where are the gaps in existing community resources? Years ago, it may have been more prescriptive. There has been a recognition that we need to better engage the community.”

More Feedback Over Time

The emphasis on community feedback is part of an ongoing evolution for service providers.

“We see a lot of community building and engagement,” said Nassau-Brownstone. “I’d say 20 years ago, there were fewer opportunities for residents to inform programs and services, but it’s clearer how core engaging residents and building trust is to program success and other resident outcomes.”

She said that has particularly been true in the post-COVID era.

“There’s a deepening link and strategic coordination between property management and resident services to support

CORES Certification Program

Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future launched the Certified Organization for Resident Engagement and Services (CORES) certification program in 2018 for organizations providing resident services in affordable rental housing, and approximately 100 organizations have been certified since. In addition to the certification, CORES has a resource library, newsletter and webinar series designed to help practitioners continue to build their capacities. CORES aims to:

- establish a common language, understanding and standards for the field of resident services;
- support continued culture and systems change at the practitioner, policymaker and investor levels;
- support and attract new sources of stable funding for resident services coordination and implementation; and
- demonstrate the impact of stable, affordable housing enriched with services.

housing stability and eviction prevention initiatives,” she said. “Oftentimes, there’s been this bright red line between the two roles and at times it created tension and conflict. In reality, property management and resident services staff have the same goal, but the way they do it is different. Both want residents to be stable and thrive in their homes.”

Meena Nutbeam, program manager for Resident Outcomes and the CORES certification at SAHF, highlighted areas that have seen growth and will continue to do so.

“The resident leadership piece is a huge area for growth,” said Nutbeam. “A lot of organizations began with establishing resident councils that created a participatory role for residents. Since then, resident leadership opportunities have grown significantly to the point that some housing organizations have residents serving on their board or trained as resident ambassadors for health, community-building and other programs.”

For NYCHA, that’s fundamental.

“A lot of our work is very resident-driven,” said Gouveia. “Once we select a [development] team, we do an assessment of the community to really understand the needs and what kind of social services they want.”

What’s Coming

The experience of residents at Ocean Bay, Betances Houses and Williamsburg Houses is instructive, but things will continue to change.

“The resident services field continues to evolve to meet changing needs and a dynamic service delivery landscape. Digital access is critical now. People need the internet to

access social services, health care, education, financial resources and jobs,” said Nassau-Brownstone. “There are a lot of barriers in terms of infrastructure, but many groups are starting to make commitments to ensure residents have access to free internet and devices. ... There continues to be an evolution of health care with increased telehealth usage. Health care organizations are also investing funding in service-enriched housing, recognizing how powerful this platform is to improving health outcomes. Financial well-being has also seen an evolution in programs: There’s been a real shift from more prescriptive, and ‘one-off’ financial education classes to a coaching model and sustained relationship which helps residents reach the educational and financial goals they identify for themselves.”

Rooney’s experience at Ocean Bay, Betances Houses and Williamsburg Houses provided a new outlook for him.

“I think it was a real paradigm shift for us,” Rooney said. “One thing I keep coming back to professionally is that you think you know a lot. You’ve studied urban planning in school and want to put it into practice. The difference is these aren’t case studies; these are people and communities that live and breathe. The best way to get to know them is by encouraging open dialogue and engaging deeply and meaningfully.”

Gouveia specifically highlighted the scholarships as evidence of resident-centered services.

“They’ve given 32 residents scholarships of \$5,000 each,” said Gouveia. “That’s hugely impactful to these folks and their education and long-term prospects. It’s a very good test case to show what you can do with and for residents.” ◆

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