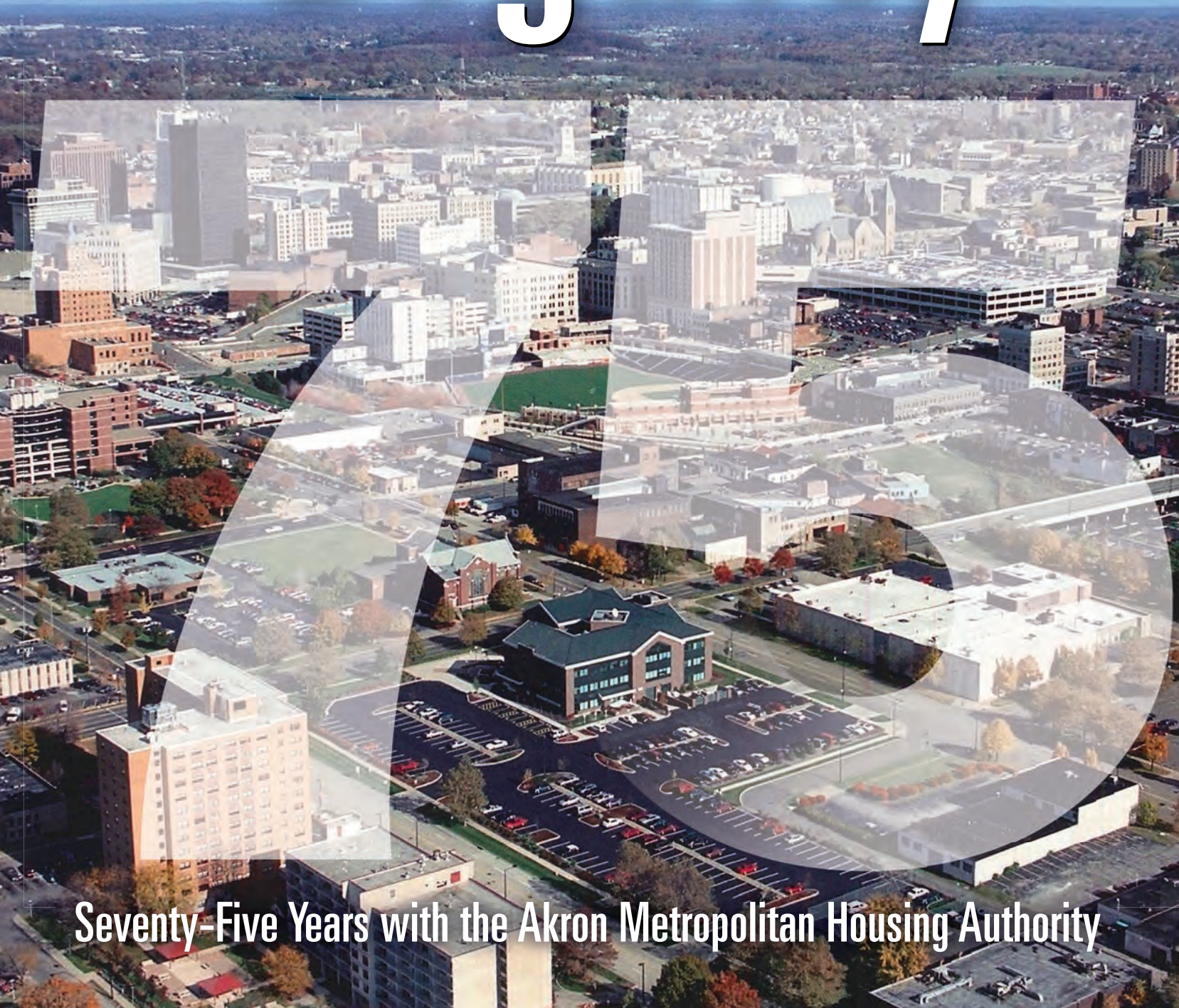


1938 - 2013



with **Housing Dignity**



Seventy-Five Years with the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority

Housing with Dignity

Seventy-Five Years with the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority

1938-2013



In Memoriam

Hazel V. Morton

This book is dedicated to the memory of Hazel V. Morton. As the 28-year-old mother of one son, Morton became a resident of Elizabeth Park in 1955. She raised four sons and a daughter in a place she described as “beautiful.” Morton worked for Akron Summit Community Action, retiring in 1980. She then served as a leader of the Tenants Council of Elizabeth Park. For Morton, public housing was “no more or less than you make of it. I’ve been here all these years, and I haven’t had a problem.” Her enthusiasm and determination became part of the AMHA drive to secure a HOPE VI grant to transform Elizabeth Park into Cascade Village. Morton’s appearances at public meetings regarding the grant brought her to the attention of Akron mayor Don Plusquellic, who appointed her as the first resident member of the AMHA board of trustees in 2003. She continued to support the expansion of social and educational services for residents until her death in 2012. ■

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Cover photo: Bruce S. Ford



BRUCE S. FORD

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1

Introduction

The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority was created 75 years ago at the height of the Great Depression.

Founders Paul Belcher and Martin Lauer exhibited visionary leadership, persistence, and political savvy in establishing housing services for the poor. Housing was seen as a way to both help those in need and create jobs for the unemployed. For more than seven decades, AMHA's successes and challenges have mirrored the patterns of change reflected in the local community and beyond.

Belcher, who went on to

serve as a member of the board for 43 years, granted interviews in his late 90s. When asked about the early struggles, his answer was characteristic of his low-key demeanor: he saw nothing unusual about the legacy he left. But in fact, public housing in Akron and around the country stands as one of the few remnants of the New Deal. Public housing, which is resilient in addressing the changing needs of the community, is now accepted as contributing to the economic development of the larger community.

AMHA is grateful for the support over the past 75 years



2



3



4



6



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75 Years of Excellence

of far too many to mention, and is very much aware that we entered the 21st century with high-quality housing and services thanks to this heritage. Although federally subsidized housing remains one of the most controversial areas of public policy—just as when it began—AMHA continues building for tomorrow.

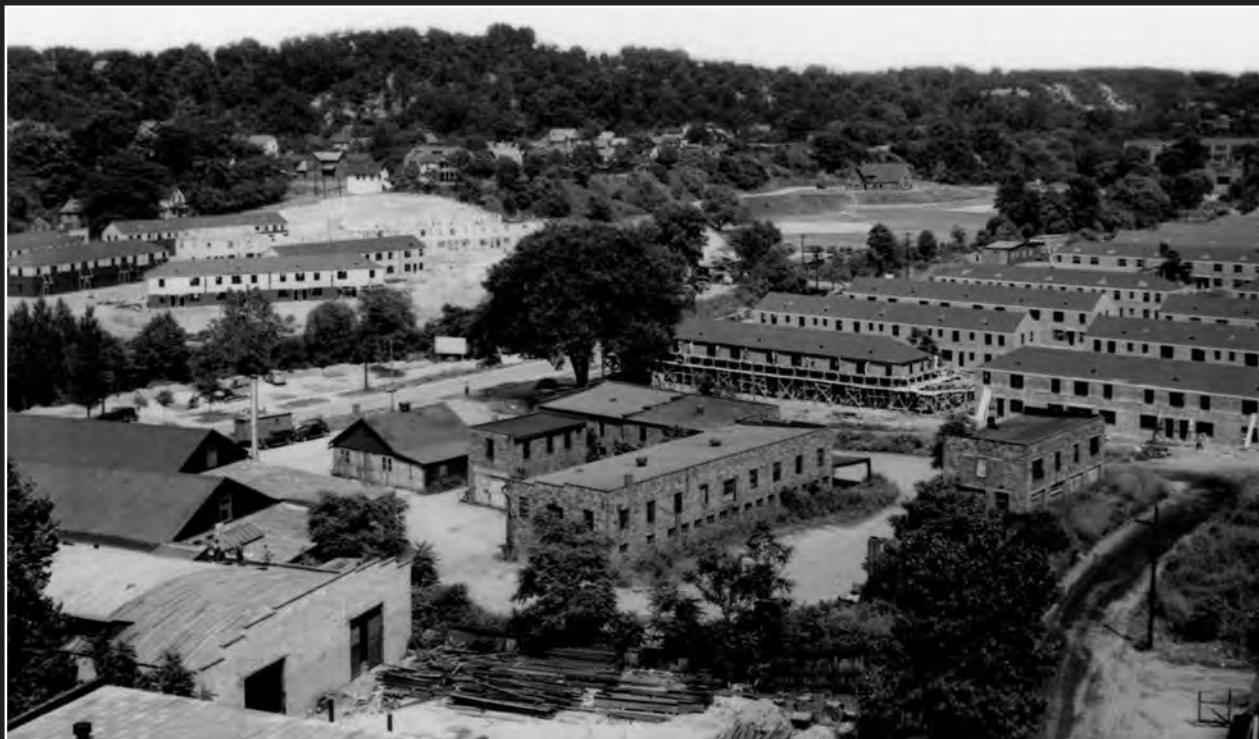
These photographs remind us of what has been accomplished. ■



1. Cascade Village, a vibrant mixed-income community, replaced Elizabeth Park with the aid of HOPE VI funding.
2. Early childhood learning and development are key strategies to address poverty.
3. AMHA's Norton Homes Office and Community Building, 1942
4. Award-winning Edgewood Village stands on the site of AMHA's second oldest public housing.
5. Curb appeal and management expertise earned Gold Key Awards from the Northeast Ohio Apartment Association.
6. Aerial view of Edgewood Village
7. Stephanie S. Keys Towers, a senior housing development built in Stow in 1982
8. Marian T. Hall Senior Building, completed in 2012
9. Low-Income Housing Tax Credits underpinned financing of the Retirement Residence of Green.
10. Vouchers assisted residents of Midtown Apartments in relocating prior to the building's demolition.
11. Elizabeth Park, AMHA's oldest public housing, prior to its demolition
12. Cascade Village Senior Center



(ALL PHOTOS: AKRON METROPOLITAN HOUSING AUTHORITY)



The first AMHA building project was Elizabeth Park Homes, pictured here under construction on July 30, 1940. The earliest residents were very happy with the modest, comfortable apartments. For many, it was their first home with all the "modern conveniences." The housing project also provided a real sense of community.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

The Beginning

1937 - 1940

It took a tragedy, the perseverance of two men, and the misfortunes of Canton to bring public housing to Akron more than 75 years ago. Although the United States Housing Act of 1937 created the federal program, communities had to provide local initiative, administration, and support in order to bring public housing to town. A local architect, Martin P. Lauer, provided the initiative and, with the assistance of banker Paul E. Belcher, generated enough support to establish the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority on January 27, 1938.

One-Man Band

After an automobile accident killed his son, Akron architect Martin Lauer sought a project to channel his energies. Ernest Bohn, an old friend from his early career days in Cleveland, interested Lauer in a developing field that was gaining increasing political support: public housing. As director of the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA), Bohn lobbied nationally for legislation supporting public housing and, after several years of work, found success in the Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937. Also known as the United States Housing Act, it allowed loaning funds to local housing authorities for slum clearance and decent housing for low-income families.

Bohn was also the first director of the National Association of Housing Officials (NAHO), and in November 1937 he brought the association's fourth annual meeting to Cleveland. The meeting focused on the implications of the new federally subsidized housing program. Lauer attended the meeting with "many misgivings," because after considerable public discussion regarding low-income housing in Akron, "the outlook seemed rather hopeless."

Lauer came away from the conference, however, filled with inspiration. "After listening to all this for several days," he wrote, "it became clear that provided this was done and that was done and many other things, that we in this community could profit by taking advantage of the Act and really begin to clean up some of the sordid areas existing in our community."

To overcome what Lauer rightly felt was the greatest hurdle—gaining enough public support to secure federal dollars for the public housing program—he sought the aid of a man he knew only by reputation as an excellent and inspiring speaker. An energetic and dynamic young lawyer with the First Central Trust Bank, Paul E. Belcher had gained a following as a public speaker by persuading local groups to once again believe in the banking industry after the bank holiday in 1933 shattered customers' confidence.

Belcher agreed to join Lauer in his efforts, and together they formed an alliance that would last the next 23 years. In 1939, as chairman of the fledgling Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, Belcher spoke before the sixth annual NAHO meeting. "When . . .

[Belcher] gave his talk entirely without notes in his characteristic forceful manner, everyone sat up and listened,” Lauer later reported. “He was characterized at the conference as a regular dynamo.”¹

Lauer had chosen well.

United States Housing Act of 1937

When President Franklin Roosevelt initiated his broad, sweeping social programs in 1933, collectively promoted as the New Deal, Bohn and others had attempted to include public housing for the many lower-income families hurt by the Depression. With limited success, some public housing was built under the Project Works Administration, including the Green Belt cities like Greenhills outside Cincinnati. A few local housing authorities were established, including the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority, and the National Association of Housing Officials was formed in 1933. However, a Supreme Court decision against federally created public housing prompted supporters to turn their attention to legislation that would legally set up a program to provide housing for low-income families.

When an overwhelming majority sent him back to the White House, Roosevelt at his second inauguration spoke elegantly of “one-third of a nation ill-housed.” The votes in Congress materialized long enough to pass the Wagner-Steagall Act, or the United States Housing Act of 1937, and the president signed the controversial bill on September 1. Largely in response to the Depression, the bill passed during a brief period when political forces happened to line up to support public housing.

Of all the New Deal programs, public housing was perhaps the one least in harmony with the American myth of “making it on your own” and with the Puritan work ethic so ingrained in society. Even the National Association of Housing Officials acknowledged from the beginning that the program would require a hard sell. In promoting the cause, they emphasized such issues as creating more jobs, buying local materials, assisting in slum clearance to make a safer city environment, and producing housing for the lower class, something that was economically infeasible for the private housing industry to build.²

Against the backdrop of the Depression, with its “Hooverilles,” mass unemployment, and visible poverty, the time for public housing—if there ever was to be a time—was now. When normal economic stability began to return, the housing coalition quickly fell apart.

The Act set up a framework for housing and slum clearance as a federal responsibility. It involved federal loans to construct housing, and federal subsidies to enable lower rents for those in need. Yet it also tried to decentralize public housing and ensure local participation and financial responsibility. It established the first permanent federal agency on behalf of low-rent subsidized housing but mandated the creation of state housing authorities, which in turn allowed communities to establish local housing authorities. These authorities could then sell tax-free government-backed bonds to pay for actual construction. The federal government would pay the



PAUL BELCHER

BOARD CHAIRMAN, 1938–1982

Much was written about Paul Belcher over the years he served as AMHA's chairman of the board, but very little of it was negative. That says a lot about the man who held a visible position in an often controversial organization.

He worked with five directors, providing a philosophy that gave the housing authority continuity and respect. When asked why he stayed with the agency, he replied, “I was willing to do it because I could see that . . . [AMHA] was accomplishing a purpose and we were being successful. I'm a lawyer, and I'm not afraid of controversy; I thrive on it. If I have to overcome opposition, that's my meat and potatoes.”

Born in Gallipolis, Ohio, Belcher graduated from Ohio University. He started as a messenger at Peoples Savings and Trust in 1922, and as the bank grew, so did Belcher's responsibilities. He retired in 1973 as chairman of the board for what became First National Bank.

The skills that earned him a reputation at the bank—a quick mind and an excellent speaking style—also made him an extraordinary board chairman for AMHA. He worked closely with all the directors, developing community and national relationships that lasted through the years. With the board, Belcher encouraged that all decisions be unanimous. “We took the position that there were just five of us and none of us are getting paid for this,” he explained. “Following that kind of approach, most of them were perfectly willing to go along with whatever recommendations I eventually had to make.”

Belcher never claimed AMHA success for himself, asserting it was a group effort. But Belcher deserved much credit because, while so many housing authorities became embroiled in politics and forgot their mission, he kept AMHA growing and serving the needs of Akron families.



M. P. LAUER

DIRECTOR, 1938–1961

Serving as an advocate and the first director of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, Martin Philippe Lauer was a man with vision. At age 50 he had lost his only son in an automobile accident and began looking to redirect his talents and energy. His career background led to his advocacy of public housing. A Cleveland native, he had apprenticed under Gustav Bohm, a well-known architect. While he designed several projects such as the Summit County Home in Munroe Falls, and the Trianon Ballroom in Akron, much of his early career focused on engineering.

Taking on the AMHA directorship in 1938, Lauer worked for much of the first year without a salary. He persevered through the public storm of controversy and remained director for 23 years. When he died on April 16, 1967, at the age of 80, the *Akron Beacon Journal* lauded him: “He was a man of vision and determination and he had the courage to fight for what he thought was right.”

Early in Lauer’s tenure, the paper described him as “quick-tempered, thin-skinned and painfully blunt, yet kind-hearted almost to a fault.” A colleague recalled, “He has never been known to run away from a battle and often has been known to start one.”

“It annoys him when casual acquaintances call him Martin, although he does not object to M. P.,” observed the author of a feature article. “New acquaintances will get along with him better if they call him Mr. Lauer. He does not discuss his beard, but is believed to have grown it at an early age to cause himself to appear older than his years.”

authorities a subsidy over a 40-year period to retire their debt on the buildings while the rents from tenants would pay for operations and maintenance.

To further complicate the process, the Housing Act also emphasized slum clearance, an early attempt at urban renewal. It required that a unit of slum housing must be razed for every subsidized unit constructed in a city. However, the slums cleared did not have to be in the same area of town as the new housing, a concept which proved confusing to the public and local officials. This requirement became unworkable, and by 1940 was eliminated. Housing authorities had to show a local need for low-cost housing and had to raise 10 percent of the cost (which could include the value of the land acquired). While the property became exempt from taxes, housing authorities usually paid 10 percent of the tenant’s rent to the city for services. Finally, before public housing projects could be approved by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), the local city government also needed to sign a letter of agreement for the selected building site.

Proponents played down the social implications, but the realities were clear. “You must provide dwellings and accommodations for the population of the community which cannot pay economic rent because of substandard incomes,” explained Hugh Pomeroy, NAHO’s field service chief. “This is a field in which private enterprise cannot operate profitably—cannot break even.”

The problem was compounded by the fact that the people who needed housing the most were too diverse and unorganized to speak for themselves; thus, their only voice was with elected officials, making public housing a political issue. So here was the challenge facing Lauer and Belcher: In order to bring public housing to Akron they needed to sell a politically unpopular and rather complicated program to the community and, more importantly, to city officials.

Meanwhile, Back in Akron

When U.S. Representative Dow Harter secured from the Wagner-Steagall Act \$5 million earmarked for Akron, the strings attached and the social implications made the money a double-edged sword. The first step to secure the funds required the creation of a housing authority, an independent local agency that operated somewhat like a school district. To date, only four cities in Ohio—Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, and Youngstown—had such arrangements, formed before the necessity of a state board. The founding of Akron’s authority was stalled when the state held up the formation of the Ohio Housing Board and the selection of a chairman. Sure that sooner or later it would have to pick up the tab, the state balked at involvement with public housing.

Finally on December 24, 1937, Akron received state authorization to organize. A little more than a month later, on January 26, 1938, at the Builders Exchange building at 640 North Main, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority officially began its service to the community.

Not surprisingly, at that first meeting Martin P. Lauer became

executive secretary and Paul Belcher was named chairman of the board. As the federal law required, various government officials appointed members of the housing authority board based on recommendations from Lauer and Belcher. Mayor Lee D. Schroy named A. W. Dickson, executive secretary of the Builders Exchange, and A. J. Frecka of the Tri-County Building Trades Council. Judges of Common Pleas Court selected Forrest L. Myers, president of the Akron Real Estate Board. The county commissioners tapped J. R. Barr, and probate judge Dean May rounded out the board with Belcher. They established an office at 31 North Summit Street and set boundaries for activity that included all of Summit County except for Sagamore Hills. The reason for its omission was to keep the housing authority independent of the control of county government, per state legislation.

Just a week after their appointment, the board members left for Washington, D.C., to meet with officials and try to get \$1.8 million for Akron. “They returned home with a pledge for the amount,” according to Lauer’s annual report. Despite this quick victory the community remained skeptical, an attitude reflected in a *Beacon Journal* editorial: “We hope also that it [AMHA] keeps its goal constantly in mind. The primary purpose of the housing authority is to rid the community of slums and provide low-cost housing for people who need it.” The editorial also complained that no one on the board had any experience with the social aspects of housing.³

The areas most frequently mentioned for the first public housing project were Lakemore and Sawyerwood, southeast of Akron. Sawyerwood began as a fishing tent camp, but as the booming rubber industry intensified the need for housing, the tent camp became permanent. The result was many people living very close together without adequate water, sewers, or streets and in very poorly constructed buildings not meant for year-round living. About 50 families lived within 800 square feet.

While public support ran high for assistance to the area, it became apparent after AMHA was organized that, as needy as Sawyerwood was, it lacked the necessary city services to qualify under the program. So AMHA began considering sites in Akron that met with the approval of the federal guidelines, and of the local political powers that soon threatened to overwhelm the fledgling authority.

Cooperation from City Council

To get operations up and going, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority requested \$15,000 from the county commissioners—who promptly turned them down. The commissioners were not “sold” on the plans for low-cost housing. More importantly, neither was the Akron City Council, whose approval AMHA needed before federal money could be released. The FHA required an Agreement of Cooperation between the local housing authority and the city government to ensure some community control in public housing.

For the next two years, public housing polarized the Akron City Council as members debated, stalled, postponed, passed, and then

rescinded, agreed upon, and then changed their minds about an Agreement of Cooperation with the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority. As Lauer reported in 1938, “[The Agreement of Cooperation from the city] precipitated a rather free-for-all dog fight. We were all rather severely bitten.” Commenting on a second year of turmoil in 1939, he wrote that “the year has been one pitched battle after another.”⁴

The first confrontation came in March 1938, when the Agreement of Cooperation came up before council. Besides the Agreement, AMHA wanted the city to clear the slum properties—with the housing authority doing the rebuilding. But some council members were tired of federal projects and accused this program of being just another “piece of New Deal trickery.”⁵ Trying to persuade the council at a public hearing a week later, Ernest Bohn, chairman of the Cleveland Council Housing Committee, promised, “You are going to get into low-cost housing sooner or later because you have to do it.” Reporting on Bohn’s success, Lauer commented, “It is regretted that some of our council were not very courteous to Mr. Bohn.”⁶

The following week in late March, the *Beacon Journal* urged the council to quit “dilly-dallying” around as an April 1 deadline approached for federal funding. Yet another week passed as councilman Thomas Wigley charged that the rent would be too high for the poor to afford, and that the program had been misrepresented by the housing authority and the newspapers as a slum clearance project. Councilman Burt Secret “heard that the houses which would be built would be knockdown affairs sent in here by a mail order house,” and Edmond Rowe claimed that “government would step into Akron, ruin personal initiative, wreck values of private property, and set up distinct classes by stating who could live in the units and who could not.”⁷ With such strong sentiment against public housing, weeks of delays followed until April 25 when, with a vote of 10 to 3, an Agreement of Cooperation was finally reached.

But the battle had barely begun. FHA officials, dissatisfied with the city’s tacit agreement, requested an amended resolution of cooperation, and so the fight over Akron public housing began again in July 1938. Tensions escalated at City Hall this time, as much of the argument focused on site selection. AMHA lobbied for a Sumner Park site—land on Inman Street that the city rented from the Sumner Home for the Aged and used as a park. Sumner Home trustees now wanted to sell the land in order to upgrade their newly acquired Merriman Road property.

On August 2, Akron City Council gave approval for housing for 300 white families on the Sumner site. But a week later the council rescinded the vote and then left on vacation until the end of the month, leaving the housing authority in limbo. In the meantime, East Akron residents organized and protested. Councilman Rowe claimed that AMHA was “bringing the wrong kind of people who would



(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

decrease housing values.” He also charged that public housing was intended for slum clearance, and that Sumner Park had no slums.

The East Akron Board of Trade and a group calling themselves the Sumner Park Protective Association held meetings and circulated petitions. One of AMHA’s own board members, Forrest Myers, also voiced his disapproval of the site. He favored one of Akron’s worst slum areas, Elizabeth Park, a dilapidated black neighborhood tucked out of sight beneath the North Hill Viaduct along the Little Cuyahoga River.⁸

Myers was not alone in his choice of Elizabeth Park. School board member and community gadfly Gus Kasch proposed taking almost a square mile of the Elizabeth Park area for slum clearance. A few days before the next meeting, councilman Luther A. Park sponsored an amendment to restrict AMHA to Elizabeth Park instead of Sumner Park. Covering the ongoing conflict, a *Beacon Journal* editorial implied that opponents to public housing pushed to have the Sumner Park property debated. They felt it would be easier to snipe at and then submerge the whole program rather than look at Elizabeth Park, which would be much easier to get approved and therefore allow public housing a toehold.⁹ The council did approve Elizabeth Park in October, so the housing authority finally could go ahead with its first project, apply for federal approval of the site, and begin planning to acquire the property.

The city council fight became even more heated almost a year later when the trustees of the Sumner Home for the Aged raised the issue of public housing in Sumner Park again so they could sell the land. This time the housing authority stayed out of the fight as East Akron Board of Trade member Kurt Arnold bellicosely proclaimed, “We cannot see our way to depreciate 1,000 homes so 26 old ladies can have a comfortable haven.”¹⁰ While the Sumner Park property was being debated, AMHA reminded council that the remaining \$3.5 million earmarked for Akron would be lost if they did not grant approval on another site for public housing.

The city council then dropped the question of Sumner Park and began a general free-for-all about public housing. Week after week they deferred the issue. Nathan Straus, head of the U.S. Housing Authority, telegraphed the council to threaten that, without their cooperation, Akron would lose the \$3.5 million. The fight continued to rage as councilwoman Virginia Etheredge shouted that anyone who voted not to take time on the project was “narrow minded and biased.” Councilman Secrest hurled a charge of improper interest at council president Robert M. Sanderson, who answered “red faced and quivering with rage,” calling Secrest “the smallest potato I know.”

Still they fought on. The next week Congressman Dow Harter warned that “council can’t play horse indefinitely with this proposition.” But council simply tabled it for another 30 days—until after November elections.¹¹

Meantime, Akron’s organized labor, which strongly supported public housing, opposed the re-election of the four vocal opponents on council. The *Beacon Journal* demanded that the council “fish or

“Is all this worthwhile?” wondered Lauer during this trying time. Why, he thought, should he subject himself to the daily onslaught of uninformed councilmen? Believing the end was in sight, Lauer continued to push public housing.

cut bait.” Editorials in the *West Akron News* proclaimed, “It is time we called a halt to socialistic experiments [like public housing] and the trend toward state socialism.”¹²

The members continued to battle, with a session in late October that “produced the most dramatic scenes the council chamber has witnessed in many a year.” One sickly councilman defied his doctor’s orders and arrived at council chambers to cast his vote in favor of public housing, only to have another member suddenly stricken ill and have to be taken home.

“Is all this worthwhile?” wondered Lauer during this trying time. Why, he thought, should he subject himself to the daily onslaught of uninformed councilmen? Believing the end was in sight, Lauer continued to push public housing.¹³ The two-year battle finally ended after the federal government took away \$2 million earmarked for public housing in Canton on October 30, 1939, because of that city council’s lack of action. The next day the Akron City Council approved plans to build 274 units on Edgewood Avenue off Wooster Avenue.

A Campaign for Education

While Akron’s fight was more intense than that of most communities, it reflected the battle raging nationally over public housing. “Everybody was afraid of it,” recalled Belcher. “They thought that it would change the conditions that existed at that time. Private initiative would be supplanted by public initiative in the housing field.”

The private housing and construction interests, like the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), vigorously opposed public housing. Their membership locally represented the kind of opposition that would continue to obstruct public housing both in Akron and across the country. To combat the negative attitudes and misinformation, Lauer and Belcher spent countless hours talking to community groups, from the Lions Club to the North Akron Recreation Association, from the Twenty-five Year Club of Summit County to the Summit County Federation of Democratic Women.

“Our earliest activity,” said Belcher, “was one of creating an environment in which the public would be willing to accept a public housing authority and permit us to do what the [Wagner-Steagall] Act provided.” An argument often presented by Belcher was that “[national public housing] must be paid for whether Akron gets any benefits or not; Akron has to pay taxes that in part go toward this program,” and more plainly spoken another time, “If our money has to pay for public housing, we want it spent in our backyard.” The two men often showed a film called *Housing in Our Time* and by 1940 had produced a 12-page booklet titled “Public Housing Comes to Akron.”

Besides courting favor at home, the pragmatic board chairman also realized the importance of outside support: “We had to cultivate all the federal authorities, all the people who were connected with it from the national level to the regional level, to the local state level, and that was a great public relations effort.”

Whether nationally or locally, the housing authority tried to present an image of an organization willing to negotiate and to compromise if need be to expand public housing in Akron. AMHA tried to balance the sometimes shrill concerns of the community with the frequently changing demands of the federal government. “You couldn’t really accomplish anything without money and all the money was coming from the federal government,” said Belcher. “So we had to satisfy the people at the federal level.”¹⁴

Elizabeth Park

Referred to as “Akron’s Little Harlem,” Elizabeth Park, hidden along the Little Cuyahoga River under the North Hill Viaduct, became the site for the city’s first public housing. Tucked down in the valley, it had been home to much of Akron’s African-American population since the middle of the 1800s. The *Beacon Journal*, writing in favor of the site for public housing, described the area: “The houses there are ripe for razing. It is one of the oldest sections of the city. Its contribution to crime, vice and juvenile delinquency is notorious. Putting a federal housing project there would not only raise living conditions, it would benefit the whole city by cleaning up one of its most antisocial areas.”¹⁵

The United States Housing Authority was less impressed with the site, and countered that vacant land was much cheaper than buying land that must be cleared. The newspaper also published rumors that Lauer was not willing to have a project at Elizabeth Park.¹⁶ At the time, most public housing projects in the country served low-income white families, not black ones. “That was not our first choice by any

Some 120 dilapidated buildings, such as those shown here, were torn down to make room for the Elizabeth Park project. Irish immigrants first settled in the area along the Little Cuyahoga River when they found employment digging the canal in the 1820s. Throughout its history the area earned a reputation for vice, poverty, and squalor, making it an easy candidate for slum elimination.

(AKRON METROPOLITAN HOUSING AUTHORITY)



means, but if that's where city council wanted us to go, that's where we were going," recalled Belcher. "And so we went down in the valley and established Elizabeth Park development."

Once Akron City Council made the decision, Elizabeth Park proved to be a difficult site on which to build housing. It took almost a year to obtain some of the necessary parcels of property. The committee relocating families also struggled; housing in Akron was already scarce in general and almost impossible to find for African Americans. The architects found the site challenging because the river cut the property in two and created soil conditions poor for building. Finally, before any construction could begin, 114 dwellings had to be razed. But given the city council's disposition, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority made the site work.

Groundbreaking finally took place on April 11, 1940, just before crews began razing the buildings. George Thompson, executive secretary of the Association of Colored Community Workers, turned the first shovel. Director Lauer claimed the date as the "Emancipation of People from Slums." Assistant law director Nathan Koplin declared, "We are this day digging up earth that people might live, instead of protecting ourselves from bullets."¹⁷ The men then took crowbars and started in on Akron's biggest construction job in a decade.

Once the project began, the long brick row houses went up quickly under the North Hill Viaduct. By November the first units were ready. According to federal regulations, the apartments could not be luxury ones, but merely adequate in order to inspire residents to be upwardly mobile. Each unit contained a combination dining room and kitchen. The kitchen boasted a sink and sanitary tub in one unit for both dishes and the laundry. Small, divided panes of glass made the windows easier to repair. Steam heat ran throughout the buildings, so tenants received



AMHA stressed that construction of Elizabeth Park would bring employment to Akron, which in 1940 still felt the sting of the Depression. Between 200 and 300 men were employed during the construction, and most of the building materials were purchased locally.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

instruction on using the new utilities.

AMHA furnished a model apartment with Goodwill Industries furniture for \$10 to demonstrate how nice the units could look. Lauer also hoped one day to add to Elizabeth Park a medical clinic and even a swimming pool because there were few places in Akron where African Americans could swim.

For the first residents, Elizabeth Park was wonderful. Many had never had electric lights before, and some had not had running water. According to new resident Gus Fletcher, "All I know is that we've been married 50 years and this is the nicest place we ever lived." Of all the improvements, the one that impressed him the most was the place below the bathroom cabinet to put old razor blades.

Families living in substandard housing or who were displaced got first choice to move in. Before the opening, the *Beacon Journal* ran a



small article trying to negate the impression that Elizabeth Park was chiefly for African Americans. It explained that because Akron's population was something less than 10 percent black, African-American families would get only 10 percent of the units. When tenants moved in, the percentages were actually closer to the reverse—with 15 percent white families and 85 percent African-American families. A white family moving into Elizabeth Park starred in an AMHA-produced film used to gather continued support for more projects. By 1942, all white families had moved out of Elizabeth Park.

The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority was unusual nationally for building its first project primarily for black families, and even more so for hiring an African American, James Miller, to manage the site. Miller ran Elizabeth Park efficiently, creating a real sense of community among the tenants. One resident who grew up there recalled, "If you put fences around the yards, it would have been a middle-class neighborhood."

When Miller died in 1946, Lauer praised him as both ardent and vocal in promoting the welfare of Akron's African-American community. "He never had the 'gimmies' and believed that everyone, regardless of race, creed, or color, should earn what they get." A *Beacon Journal* editorial stated, "Jim Miller was the type of citizen who is an asset in any community." C. W. Seiberling wrote that "by his wise counsel and unselfish work he did much for our community, which I assure you is a better community for his having lived in it."

Edgewood and Norton Homes

While the Akron City Council fought over public housing, the Barberton City Council with much less struggle unanimously passed in October 1939 an Agreement of Cooperation with the Akron Met-

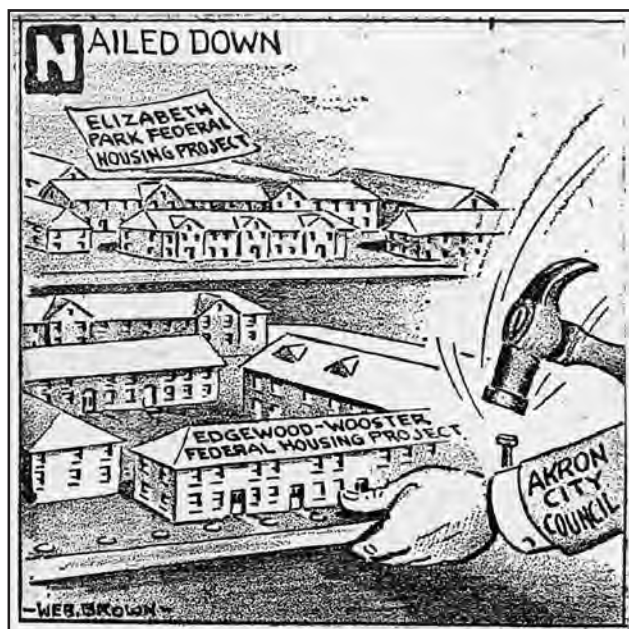
An architect's concept of Elizabeth Park, with its 32 neat brick building and recreation areas, made a sharp contrast to the slum conditions that existed.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

ropolitan Housing Authority. At about the same time as the approval for Edgewood in Akron, they passed a project to be built on Norton Avenue.

Construction began in the fall of 1940 on both projects. Like those at Elizabeth Park, the brick row houses each contained several units, with about 300 units total. This was state-of-the-art public housing for its day, boasting Georgian-style architecture and recreation areas. But even as Edgewood and Norton Homes began construction, AMHA faced a new challenge: housing defense workers. ■

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)



Notes

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7. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 23 March 1938.
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11. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 6, 10, 11 October 1939.
12. *West Akron News*, 26 October 1939.
13. Lauer, "Brief History," p. 3.
14. Interview with Paul Belcher, November 1988.
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16. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 28 January 1938.
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During World War II, people migrated to Akron to work in the burgeoning defense industries that had to quickly retool for war production. The sudden influx brought on a severe housing shortage. East Barberton Homes, pictured here, were constructed to replace the Van Buren Trailer Park. The trailers had been brought in as temporary lodging for the families of the many workers at Babcock & Wilcox. Unfortunately, even after East Barberton Homes were completed, housing was so scarce that the trailer park had to remain open.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

Defense Housing

1940 - 1945

With Elizabeth Park opening and Edgewood and Norton Homes approved, it looked as if public housing had become a permanent part of Akron. But if anything, the opposition grew louder.

Late in 1940, the National Association of Real Estate Boards passed a proposition that the United States Housing Act should be repealed. Locally, real estate proponents had been protesting AMHA throughout the year. Albert Ritzman, chairman of the Ohio Board of Real Estate Examiners, called public housing “obnoxious and cockeyed.” “The housing program,” he said, “is not slum clearing but slum spreading, . . . it is not American, it is un-American.”¹

In April a recall petition was circulated against one of the council members who had voted for a housing project near the airport. Councilman John Head complained that the man circulating the petition was a “Real Estate Board stooge.” In August, a *Beacon Journal* editorial accused the Real Estate Board of starting a whispering campaign, promoting the idea that Lauer, Belcher, and a handful of others were the only support for public housing. The realtors feared being accused of selfishness and short-sightedness if they were too public with their comments. C. C. Howell, president of the Real Estate Board, claimed that big-city slum clearance was out of place in a town like Akron since it had so much vacant land surrounding it. This was not a place for apartments, but a city of individual homes.

Meanwhile, the *Beacon Journal* ran photographs of Akron’s slums and featured stories of families living in squalor, revealing an unpleasant side of the city most citizens rarely saw. In a Sunday Forum Poll the newspaper asked, “Do you believe that Akron should continue to seek federal housing projects?” Less than 10 percent of those who responded said no. The next question: “Do you believe that slum clearance projects hold back building and extend slum conditions rather than clearing them up?” This time less than 15 percent said yes.²

However, even with such overwhelming public support, Mayor Lee Schroy disapproved a third housing site on Seiberling Street near the municipal airport. He called for time to observe the Elizabeth Park and Edgewood Avenue projects before committing to another.

The Debate

While the debate over public housing continued in Akron, M. P. Lauer was requested in June 1940 to travel to Washington, D.C., where he sat as a member of the Defense Housing Committee of the United States. Later he recalled:

It was at this meeting that we were informed that despite anything that anyone might say we definitely were getting into

*a war, and that it would be necessary in the industrial centers of the United States to build Housing Projects for the express purpose of accommodating workers who would be called into the various industrial centers. This Committee was cautioned about talking of a war, as it was fearful that we might be termed warmongers; and to announce that we were going to build a Housing Project for defense workers had to be handled rather diplomatically.*³

On June 28, Congress amended the United States Housing Act of 1937 to authorize its use for housing defense workers, and on October 14 they passed a basic defense housing law, the Lanham Act. Instead of slum clearance, the priority in public housing became housing defense workers. Said Langdon Post, special assistant to the administrator of the U.S. Housing Authority, “Rehousing is just as much a part of national defense as building battleships.” Federal agencies concerned with housing, Post remarked, are “strategically situated to play an important part in the national defense setup. They are just waiting for the curtain to rise so they can take their cues.”

Such arguments did not impress members of Akron City Council. The war in Europe remained far away for most Americans. When the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority requested 300 more family units, councilman Luther Park accused Lauer of being pernicious and misleading to attempt to tie housing to the national defense program. “The arguments for housing formerly were that it was needed to find jobs and eliminate slums,” said Park. “Their arguments are shopworn so now they have a new one. The inference is that if you’re not for defense—you are a traitor or a filthy communist.”⁴

Early in 1941 as the war in Europe expanded, both Lauer and Belcher were called back to Washington to discuss defense housing. Officials regarded Akron as a key industrial center because of the rubber parts in bombers, artillery, tanks and tanks, gas masks, and nonrigid airships. They agreed that the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority would accept the responsibility for building defense housing in Akron. The units would be owned by the federal government and need no local approval, unlike earlier public housing projects.

AMHA became the first local housing authority chosen to build a defense project directly for the Federal Works Administration.⁵

Skeptical Akron

News of the housing agreement at home merely refocused the housing debate, raising questions as to the need for additional homes. The *West Akron News* opined, “Akron lost 12,000 people from 1930–1940 so why do we need new housing? Akron will have no difficulty in taking care of any mechanics who may move in on war orders.”

The real estate community also protested that no housing shortage existed. “We anticipate no future shortage,” claimed C. C. Howell. Four days later on February 8, 1941, however, his company ran a sales ad for a boarding house which boasted, “Increas-

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The United Rubber Workers sent out telegrams endorsing defense housing and attacking the “selfish real estate interests.” “Local real estate interests oppose the defense project because they want to force an increase of rents . . . and because they want to unload sub-standard houses on defense workers at exorbitant prices.”⁶ Real estate interests countered that they were not being given an opportunity to show they could handle the housing situation.

After Earl Smith, president of the Akron Real Estate Board, protested that private enterprise could take care of any growth Akron might experience, National Defense Housing coordinator Charles Palmer killed the 300 units for the city approved by President Roosevelt. The next day, on March 5, 1941, the *Beacon Journal* headline read: NEW GOODYEAR AIRPLANE PARTS FACTORY WILL EMPLOY 5,000. The paper encouraged people to advertise rooms for rent to ease the housing shortage, while Smith promised that 1,000 new rental units would quickly be made available.

Belcher charged the Real Estate Board with failure to recognize the gigantic scope of the national defense effort. The *East Akron News* reported that homeowners and businesses had bitter feelings against First Central Bank because of Belcher, and there was a movement to boycott the bank. Even the *Beacon Journal* remained somewhat skeptical about any tremendous growth, but did admit that “if there is [a housing shortage], building men must take the blame.”⁷ To prove the housing need, surveys multiplied, produced by a range of organizations including the Akron Real Estate Board and the Defense Coordination Committee.

Regardless of local opinion, on April 24, 1941, Charles Palmer gave the go-ahead for a \$1 million 300-unit defense housing project on Cole Avenue. Defense housing also gained two more projects with Norton and Edgewood Homes, under construction since January by the housing authority. Edgewood would have 274 units in 36 buildings and Norton Homes would have 219 units in 42 buildings. Planned for low-income families before the need for defense housing arose, construction on the projects had slowed in the fall because the housing authority was unable to get priorities on building materials. AMHA solved the problem by making both projects part of defense housing, thus ensuring access to needed supplies.

No Rooms for Rent

As the country geared up to enter World War II, Akron became an important industrial center. In October 1940, the first major war contract went to the Goodyear Aircraft Corporation for six blimps to help track German submarines. At the airship dock, the company had employed 30 workers to make airplane bomber parts in 1939. By 1942 the company was hiring at the rate of 1,000 a month and in 1943 had 33,500 on the payroll.

Over at Firestone, 1,500 anti-aircraft guns a month came off the

production line, along with tank tracks, machine gun cartridges, and gun turrets. The B. F. Goodrich Company produced all types of rubberized clothing. Akron historian Karl Grismer claimed it was unlikely that any American soldier went through the war without using some piece of Goodrich-made apparel. Akron companies supplied millions of tires, for trucks and tractors, for jeeps and bulldozers, for fighter planes and staff cars. They made “Mae West” life vests, life rafts, rubber pontoons for bridges, and barrage balloons.

In 1939 Akron manufacturers employed 52,656 people. By 1944 the number had climbed to 130,253. With much of the traditional workforce enlisting to go off to fight, the companies hired women and older men, as labor scouts recruited throughout the southern states to round up more workers.⁸

By the spring of 1942, arguments about the need for housing in Akron had ended—because there was no housing. One week the *Beacon Journal* listed only two unfurnished houses for rent. The paper urged homeowners to make spare rooms available. It ran one hardship story after another about families trying to make do, living in garages, in places with no water, men separated from their families. It wrote about the plight of workers trying to answer want ads only to find the apartment taken, or finding no children allowed.

The city faced the worst housing shortage since the rubber boom of 1917 and 1918; in Washington, D.C., Akron’s housing problem was recognized as one of the toughest and most acute in the nation. In an analysis of the problem, *Beacon Journal* writer Karl Grismer blamed it on two factors: (1) Akron failed to heed government warnings of needed housing, and (2) the government failed to be straightforward about its planned defense role for Akron. Whatever the reasons, AMHA found itself in the spotlight for filling the desperate need.

Building, Building, Building

There was an air of urgency at the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, with one building project seeming to start after another. Some projects like Ardella Homes began almost without notice, while others, like Wilbeth-Arlington, were covered step by step by the local paper. After the Cole Avenue project came plans for 500 units at South Arlington and Wilbeth Road. Wilbeth-Arlington, as it became known, was temporary housing constructed of concrete block. In preparing the site, crews saved the topsoil for victory gardens and then promised to respread the dirt over the entire area after the buildings were torn down at the end of the war.

“The federal government told the housing authorities what they wanted, and it was up to us to present specific plans and specifications for what we wanted to build in a given area,” explained Belcher. “Because of our contacts with various federal officials that we had developed, they looked upon us, I think, even to a greater extent than we upon them for guidance.”⁹

By early February 1942, the housing authority approved the

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—Paul Belcher

contracts for the 500 units at Wilbeth-Arlington and in March signed off on the Ardella Homes project. Made using “panelized” construction instead of concrete blocks, the 160 units in Ardella Homes were built for African-American families. The same construction was used for a site known as South East Homes. In 1944, 500 units known as Hillwood Homes were completed, as were the 240 units named East Barberton.

With each project Lauer became increasingly frustrated with the lack of workmanship and the problems with supplies. The earlier cement block construction found at Wilbeth-Arlington soon gave way to quicker, cheaper building materials. Finally, Lauer refused to accept the recently completed East Barberton Homes project. He found “warped floors as high as six inches, practically all of the plumbing leaking, floors badly stained, and not one window operative in the entire Project.”¹⁰

The housing units failed to meet ever-expanding defense needs, so the federal government brought in trailers for the Akron workforce. In December 1942 the first trailers arrived at a park on South Arlington Street and were opened to families in May 1943. That spring, 240 more trailers, known as Van Buren Trailer Park, came to Barberton for the specific purpose of relieving the labor housing situation at the Babcock & Wilcox Company. When constructed, East Barberton Homes was to replace the trailer park, but the housing situation remained too tight and both projects remained full.

The trailer parks provided central laundries, toilets, and showers. Tenants bought their own oil for heating, gas for cooking, and ice for the coolers. While some families were pleased to have shelter, others complained that the beds were bad and bathrooms shared by four families quickly became a mess. The sites offered no shade and no place to play for the almost 300 children who called the trailer parks home.

Instant Housing

Even with the temporary dwellings and the trailer parks, Akron needed more housing, especially for African-American families. So the federal government added “mobile units,” a cross between a trailer and a house built by the Palace Coach Company. Set up on vacant lots and resting on wooden foundations, the units looked like trailers until the sides were swung out, creating a 24-foot living/dining room on one side and two bedrooms on the other. The bathroom and kitchen occupied the center section.

About 570 mobile units on vacant lots dotted the city, though most were concentrated in the South Arlington area. African-American families rented about 200 units, placed in areas “that won’t cause trouble.”¹¹

Although the mobile units relieved some of the housing shortage, it quickly became apparent that these mobile units were firetraps. The square, compact houses became potential bombs with heating and cooking units that could easily be misused. The housing authority provided instructions for the new equipment, but

after a number of fires and several deaths, sprinkler systems were installed. In the winter, poorly fitting doors and windows let in the cold, while the roof insulation caused severe condensation, creating roof and wall leaks.

AMHA also built dormitories near Ardella Homes for workers from Jamaica jointly recruited by the War Manpower Commission and the rubber companies. Four buildings held 270 men who ate in a common cafeteria. At one time during the war, AMHA housed almost 400 Jamaicans both in the dormitories and at the Van Buren Trailer Park. Unlike the majority of tenants, Lauer wrote, “[The Jamaicans] have been a constant source of annoyance as they are destructive of property, extremely demanding and not inclined to be too clean.”¹²

Between the temporary dwellings, the trailers, the mobile units, and the dormitories, the housing authority made strides in reducing Akron’s housing shortage. But the makeshift structures were not without problems. The cold winter of 1944 revealed a lack of proper insulation, freezing hundreds of pipes. The authority formed an emergency team to wage war against the leaking plumbing. Many of the projects lacked good drainage and tenants battled mud or dust, depending on the season.

Yet the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority filled a critical role in wartime Akron and had done it almost overnight. In 1940 the authority housed only 104 families. Just four years later, almost 14,000 people called AMHA their landlord.

The Tenants

Workers employed by local defense industries and their families filled the overgrowing number of units. Workers with families residing outside the city received preference. Families came from all over the country. In Norton Homes there was even a South Dakota Club. In Barberton, Mexican families lived on one side of the trailer park and Southerners lived on the other. People from 38 states called Hillwood home. Blacks from the Deep South occupied most of Ardella Homes. In general, folks from West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee represented the largest part of the population. Many of these new tenants had never had indoor plumbing, did not know how to use a gas stove, and some were frightened the first time they heard the sound of a flushing toilet.

Turnover was fairly low in the housing projects, with the exception of the trailers. There was no other place to live in Akron. Some of the projects formed close-knit communities, while others had their share of disturbances—especially considering the number of children being raised among families with different backgrounds in such close quarters. In Hillwood Homes, 1,117 of the 2,224 tenants were children.

Housing African-American Families

The defense housing was not under rent control as was Elizabeth Park. But most families living in Elizabeth Park enjoyed higher wages be-



The well-planned brick buildings of Elizabeth Park and Edgewood Homes gave way to quickly constructed housing developments like Hillwood Homes, erected to ease the city's severe housing shortage during World War II. Because of the rubber companies, Akron became an important center to the defense industry and attracted thousands of new workers.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

cause of defense work. By the end of 1942, 52 percent of the families there had income too high to qualify for the rent-subsidized project. However, AMHA balked at evicting them, in part because housing for African Americans was even harder to find than for white families. To solve the dilemma, Belcher announced that rents would be raised and the housing project would be self-supporting during the war since the majority of the workers were in defense.

The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority received complaints from the African-American community about Edgewood Homes. The project displaced black families but they were not allowed to sign up for apartments. AMHA, like most local housing authorities in the nation at that time, practiced segregation. When the first Akron Interracial Clinic was sponsored by the Akron Ministerial Association in 1945, Lauer attended but did not follow up on the group's recommendations. The clinic encouraged integration, no public housing built in unhealthy or unsightly locations, and the addition of a black member on the public housing board. While AMHA could boast about the quality in buildings, Edgewood Homes would not be integrated for 10 years and William Fowler, the first African-American board member, would not be appointed until 1961.

More Than Housing

As the defense industry took off and Akron's population soared, complaints grew about juvenile delinquents, lack of child care, and housing shortages hampering the factories. Besides the housing problem, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority took on child care when no other agency in the city responded to fill the need. When the schools refused to participate, the Works Progress Administration cooperated with the housing authority to set up child-care centers at Edgewood Homes. A few months later, in May 1943, the agency received money from the Lanham Act for addi-

tional child-care centers. “The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority,” said Belcher, “was the first one in the country to sponsor a child-care program and it is the first one to which a federal grant has been made.”¹³

Mary Cook, who held a Ph.D. in child care, oversaw the centers at Edgewood, Cole Avenue, Norton, Ardella, Elizabeth Park, and two at South Arlington. After AMHA’s success, the Ohio Civilian Defense Office argued that it should run the program. “It was said that we are largely a building and engineering organization, not designed for child care,” responded Lauer. “The housing authority builds, manages the tenant buildings, provides playgrounds, recreation centers and child care centers, all in accordance with the law and its purpose.”

After a 1944 ruling from the Ohio attorney general that it was not within the province of the housing authority to carry on such programs, the AMHA board created the nonprofit Summit County Child Care Association. Under this name, child care at the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority proved to be very successful, and when the federal money ran out in 1945 there were protests in order to keep them open.

Defense housing workers and their families enjoyed a range of services, often provided in conjunction with other organizations. The Akron Community Service Center sponsored classes on homemaking at Elizabeth Park, and the Akron Health Department offered a New Baby Clinic. At Wilbeth-Arlington, home nursing was taught. Most housing projects had recreation programs, tenants councils, and organizations like the Girls Club, Boys Club, and Mothers Club. At Edgewood, under the management of Mrs. M. P. Lauer, tenants published a newspaper, the *Edgewood Home Bulletin*. They also enjoyed a hobby shop sponsored by the YMCA, a Sunday school, and a nursery. Edgewood Homes sponsored a flower garden contest judged by a landscape engineer who personally furnished prizes of unusual daffodil bulbs. The Ministerial Association provided a full-time worker to get people interested in Sunday services. The public library maintained branch libraries in several projects.

Gaining Acclaim

Unlike the reaction during its infancy, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority received a great deal of positive publicity and praise from community leaders during the war years. The *Beacon Journal* apologized for its prewar short-sightedness about housing shortages and praised Lauer for his vision. Many lauded Lauer’s role in the child-care centers. Nationally, the federal Public Housing Authority exhibited photographs of neatly kept Cole Avenue with its white buildings and wide lawns.

The local papers frequently ran human-interest stories featuring defense housing, most of it positive though some less flattering, like a report in January 1941 when the housing authority evicted its first family who failed to pay rent. The most unusual story came out when a family left Edgewood Homes for three days during fumiga-

tion. AMHA had understood they were going to stay with relatives. Evidently arrangements fell through, so after the mother with several small children got tired of walking around, they took shelter in a Glendale Cemetery mausoleum. Police rescued them about midnight in the middle of a storm after the caretaker thought he saw someone on the grounds.

By the war's end, AMHA controlled 2,794 units of housing within Akron and Barberton. Belcher summarized the war years for the housing authority as "a period of great rapid development. And having developed it in this fashion and given the public an idea of what we could do and how we could do it, it created a reputation on our part so that the public itself came to the conclusion that whatever we [AMHA] said we'd do, we'd do."¹⁴

The housing authority would not see another era of real growth until after 1967. Thus, the legacy of World War II defense housing would define AMHA for the next 20 years. ■

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5. M. P. Lauer, "Yearly Report to the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority Board of Directors," 1941, p. 2.
6. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 19 February 1941.
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11. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 11 July 1943.
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Akron, like most urban industrial areas, faced a critical shortage of housing during and after World War II. This property was typical of late 19th century construction showing a great deal of deterioration by the 1940s. This apartment building was demolished to make room for the construction of Edgewood Homes.

Housing Veterans

1945 - 1954

Though the National Housing Agency foresaw defense housing needs long before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, they had given little consideration to the need for veteran housing after V-J Day. As veterans started to stream back, their expectations for a home of their own caught housing experts and city governments by surprise.

After four years of fighting for their country, veterans looked forward to settling down with their new brides in new homes bought with GI Bill loans. Over a million more marriages took place between 1940 and 1944 than in the previous four-year period. While the number of families grew during the war, however, private building did not. Except for defense housing, there had been no homebuilding since Pearl Harbor. And workers living in defense housing showed little inclination toward going back to wherever they had come from.

By the end of 1945, according to an Associated Press survey, housing had become the number one problem in America. In Akron, “the housing shortage which has been serious for the last four years is now worse than ever before,” reported the *Beacon Journal* in October 1945.

Housing was tight. The Veterans Information Center put scores of families in cottages at Portage Lakes until winter hit. One veteran living with his wife and six children in an abandoned dance hall near Turkeyfoot Lake claimed, “I spent two years on Attu [Alaska] and it’s colder in that old jive joint than it ever was up in the Aleutians.” Frustrated veterans lived with in-laws, in converted garages, or doubled up in apartments. As did the defense workers only four years earlier, needy veterans raced to every advertised apartment, only to find it filled or unavailable to families with children.

At first, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority did not see itself as a player in the solution to the veteran housing shortage. “There’s only one solution to the housing problem,” said Lauer. “Private enterprise must get into it and do the job.” Yet surprisingly, most builders initially expressed reluctance to begin any development. In part, they still suffered from supply shortages, but most were protesting government war housing regulations that required six-month vacating notices and maintained rent and price ceilings.

The few houses available around town sold at inflated prices, making ownership out of reach for most veterans—even with GI Bill home loans. In Akron there were exceptions, like AMHA board member Ray Heslop, who during the war had been the only builder besides the housing authority to provide new housing on a large scale. Right after the war, the Heslop Building & Realty Company began construction on what would become the largest postwar housing project in Ohio.



By the fall of 1946, builders had ended their standoff with the government and Akron experienced its greatest building program since 1929. But even with all the building, housing in Akron remained tight well into the 1950s. AMHA ran a full house for the next decade.

Defense Housing Stays Standing

In September 1945 the War Housing Center, which helped defense workers, closed and in its place the Veterans Information Center opened. AMHA, which had been on the front line for housing defense workers, now found itself trying to meet the expectations of the returning veterans.

In less than two months in the summer of 1945, the housing authority placed 127 veterans and their families; by the end of the year the authority's waiting list had grown to 2,000 veterans who needed public housing. At the same time, the turnover in the projects was smaller than ever—as the vacancies predicted in defense housing did not materialize after the war ended. An estimated half of the 15,000 families who came to Akron for defense jobs stayed after the war. AMHA director M. P. Lauer wasn't surprised. "To some the war housing is the best they ever had," he said. "They'll want to stay."¹ Defense workers also held leases, ensuring housing for two years after the war.

As the war drew to a close, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority had made plans to dispose of its defense housing. In autumn 1945, Lauer spoke before the Akron Real Estate Board and promised that the defense housing would be taken down as quickly as possible. Trailers would go first, then the mobile homes. Next the frame buildings would be razed and then the concrete-block ones of Wilbeth-Arlington and Cole Avenue Homes. Lauer felt only Ardella Homes should remain standing. They had been built for African-American families who came to work in Akron's defense industries; Lauer predicted most would want to stay in Akron, and if Ardella was razed, "where are they going to live?" Blacks in the city, who could buy or rent only in certain neighborhoods, faced a housing shortage twice as severe as that for white families.

Keeping his promise, Lauer tried to shut down the trailer parks. But by January 1946, as the housing situation only grew worse in Akron, Lauer gave in to community pressure and reopened the Arlington trailer camp for veterans only. "We were tickled to be able to move into the trailers," recalled veteran Robert Turpin. He and his new bride had been living in an attic apartment with a hot plate, no running water, and the bathroom on the floor below.²

The newspaper carried daily stories of veterans frantically searching for homes, making do with cellars, attics, or family guest rooms, a situation that made even the trailers appealing. "It's far better than living with in-laws or crowded in small quarters with a lot of other people," reported one trailer dweller.

Housing problems continued to mount and, by the spring of 1946, the city and federal housing authorities agreed to share the

The mobile dwellings brought in during the war continued to serve as housing until 1952. While a few residents made improvements on the poorly constructed, trailer-like buildings, most quickly became dilapidated.

(AKRON METROPOLITAN HOUSING AUTHORITY)

expenses of bringing in more public housing to add to the defense housing. Under AMHA's supervision, barracks brought down from Kellogg Field in Battle Creek, Michigan, were placed on the shores of Summit Lake. After frustrating delays caused by a shortage of labor and plumbing supplies, the projects known as Margaret Park and Lane Field opened in January 1947.

Veterans with the neediest cases were given priority for the units after the housing authority received three times as many applications as they had units available. While many were pleased with the housing, the quickly constructed projects were not without problems, as veterans found out the next summer. The ungraded site and screenless buildings became mired in dust, mud, and mosquitoes.

Families in Margaret Park and Lane Field also discovered that finding their own units at night was a problem. The Navy furnished surplus battleship gray paint for the projects, which made the buildings invisible at night. A year later AMHA repainted the buildings a cream color so residents could find their homes in the dark. Veterans housed in units on Wooster Avenue faced other unique problems when the Ringling Brothers–Barnum & Bailey Circus set up on vacant land behind them. Not only were the flies, crowds, and odors overwhelming, but elephants ran into their cars parked in the AMHA lots.

A Sense of Community

In most of the projects, a spirit of neighborliness grew. The veterans were all about the same age, with children about the same age.

Wilbeth-Arlington and Hillwood Homes worked to establish a YMCA. Hillwood Homes held a fundraiser to provide supervisors on the playground after the city closed it because of a lack of funds. There were so many children at Hillwood that the former nursery was turned into two classrooms, one for a kindergarten and one for first grade. Community Chest funds operated a nursery at Edgewood Homes for two years after federal funding ended. The Ardella Housewives League sponsored such events as a children's beauty contest and garden beautification campaign.

Wilbeth-Arlington, with more than 500 families, functioned like a small town with manager Miriam Spiggle serving as a stern but respected mayor. "They would rather pay rent than have to go see Miss Spiggle," remembered one employee.³ The project even included a clinic with a doctor and three nurses, and an interdenominational church. Spiggle recalled later that, for her, the heyday of the project was during those years with the veterans.

Closing Defense Housing

Edgewood and Norton Homes became the first projects to return to normal after the war crisis. Unlike most AMHA-managed housing, these prewar projects fell under subsidized housing guidelines—which included income ceilings. In May 1947, Washington ordered the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority to evict those families over the income limit. Of the 769 tenants, 384 received notices, with

"They would rather pay rent than have to go see Miss Spiggle."

*—anonymous employee
to Wilbeth-Arlington manager
Miriam Spiggle*

two years to find new homes. Civic leaders drafted an appeal to President Truman to lift the restrictions on evictions. He refused. Supporting the president's stand, the *Beacon Journal* stated, "It is proper that low-rent housing should be restored to its original purpose."⁴

The housing authority finally closed the Arlington and Van Buren trailer parks at the end of the decade. In order to dispose of the trailers, veterans could bid on them for \$75 to \$200. A lottery drawing was held to select who would choose their trailers first. Almost twice as many veterans attended the auction at the Arlington park as there were well-worn trailers to purchase.

The Korean conflict in 1950 suspended AMHA plans to close down the mobile units—"cracker boxes," as Lauer called them. The "temporary" defense units like Wilbeth-Arlington and Hillwood Homes remained full and, while Akron's housing crisis had eased some, plans to raze them were abandoned.

"Akron's temporary housing is getting more permanent all the time," commented the newspaper in 1951,⁵ when AMHA still had 1,200 families on a waiting list. The schools began to wonder, too, since the veterans' growing families affected their planning. Increasingly, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority affected the city's planning and influenced growth patterns.

Defense housing built under the Lanham Act, such as Cole Avenue, did not have the same guidelines as Edgewood Homes since the Public Housing Authority, not AMHA, owned the buildings. A group of veterans at the Cole Avenue project enjoyed living there and, recognizing the economic opportunities, proposed to buy it. Built early in the war, the 300 units at Cole Avenue were more substantial than later projects. The group incorporated in April 1950, changed the project name to Park Lane Manor, and offered everyone living there a share for \$300. While AMHA would have preferred to take over ownership, they assisted the veterans in negotiations with the Public Housing Authority.

Before an agreement could be signed, however, the military conflict in Korea froze all government housing. It was not until June 1952, after several years of negotiation, that the group officially took control of their tenants cooperative. Many of the families in the development bought shares, but 10 apartments remained rentals.

Race Problems

Finally in 1953, the housing authority received orders to close the mobile dwellings because of federal budget cuts. Since Akron was one of the few cities in the country that still maintained temporary dwellings, families received only five months' notice. Making the situation worse, of the 480 families affected, 280 were African American, who faced a much more difficult time finding new housing.

While the black population in Akron had risen 100 percent since 1940, rental properties available to them remained scarce. This was true nationwide, as African Americans' income had doubled during the war but lending institutions were hesitant to provide mortgages. With the wartime housing shutdown in Akron and across the coun-

try, many families got caught, being neither poor enough for public housing nor rich enough to buy a home of their own.

The mobile unit evictions became an issue in the 1953 mayoral race and prompted a survey by a group known as Americans for Democratic Action. Of 50 families living in the units, half white and half black, 36 percent had three or more children. Thirty worked in the rubber plants and only two families had cars as new as 1952. While the white families maintained a slightly higher standard of living, only five breadwinners took home more than \$80 a week.

AMHA Gets War Housing

Also in 1953, the federal government made decisions on the defense housing that originally was slated to be torn down three years after the end of the war emergency. Congress amended laws to allow cities control of the property built under the Lanham Act. In Akron, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority was awarded title to the projects if it acquired the underlying land. Under the War Emergency Act, the government took the land by publishing vague descriptions and then constructed the defense housing on the leased land. AMHA took on the task of tracing land ownership and then purchasing the property.

Excitement over the ownership quickly wore off as the housing authority faced several challenges in acquiring the land. Hillwood Homes became the first problem. A realty company had bought the site from the original owners who had leased it to the government, and offered to sell it to AMHA for an inflated price. The company threatened to tear down the 320 units if AMHA didn't buy the land. The case went to court and on December 19, 1953, the parties reached an agreement allowing the housing authority control of Hillwood and South East Homes.

Wilbeth-Arlington, the best-built of the war housing (except for Cole Avenue), came under AMHA ownership last. Wilbeth-Arlington was owned by the Navy, which not only refused to relinquish the project but also continued to require that Navy families receive priority. Of 500 families living in the development, only 19 had ties to the Navy. Not until July 1954 did the Navy agree to give up Wilbeth-Arlington. AMHA then tracked down the 138 different owners of the land to acquire the property.

By the end of 1954, the agency possessed all the Lanham Act properties, amounting to 1,572 units.

Ohio Taxes

In 1942 the Ohio legislature, never supportive of public housing, changed the law that allowed public housing to be tax exempt. To circumvent this provision, Ohio's local housing authorities turned over their projects, on paper, to the federal government. To punish the state, the federal government then barred Ohio from any further public housing since it was the only state in the country to charge tax.

When in 1947 the local housing authorities lobbied the state legislature to change the law, the real estate interests fought back. "The

Akron Authority is doing a good job—they are doing a good job of making their jobs secure,” charged realtor Earl Smith.

In 1951 the Ohio Supreme Court ruled in favor of public housing after the state legislature passed a bill declaring that such housing had a public purpose and that the housing authority should pay a service fee equivalent to 10 percent of the value of the property taxes owed. The margin was so narrow that bond attorneys were still hesitant to get involved with financing projects. Yet conditions had improved enough by October 1951 that AMHA was able to “buy” back Edgewood, Elizabeth Park, and Norton Homes from federal control.

The Housing Act of 1949

The battle among the National Real Estate Association, the National Home Builders Association, and the National Association of Housing Officials over whether the government should build public housing came to a head in the postwar era. Those involved in the construction industry considered public housing a step toward socialism in America; they contended they could build good housing for all economic levels. NAHO officials, however, complained that private enterprise had not proven its ability to provide decent housing for low-income families. Democratic Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Republican Senator Robert Taft of Ohio managed to bring about a compromise bill that finally passed the liberal Congress produced by Truman’s surprise victory in 1948. The bill favored private enterprise by allowing the federal government to buy land in slum areas and sell it at one-third of its value to builders to construct industrial, commercial, or residential developments. Thus, urban renewal was the bill’s central concern, but there was also provision for 135,000 houses per year. As a strong conservative, Taft was the critical factor in the compromise; he admitted that private enterprise could not provide affordable housing for low-income families, and he convinced other Republicans, including U.S. Representative Frances Payne Bolton of Cleveland, to vote for the bill.

The Act could have given a boost to public housing. However, the Korean War led once again to a drain on housing supplies and to funding overall. Then the nation elected Dwight Eisenhower, a moderate Republican, as president. Under Ike, the goal was reduced to 35,000 homes per year, as he funneled money into the escalating Cold War and the development of nuclear weapons. Also affecting citizens’ support for public housing was the continuing deterioration of war housing that had been rapidly and poorly built, and then kept going beyond its useful life because of the housing needs of veterans. “Public housing is still experimental,” Senator Taft noted, “and the experiment has been very much confused by the intervening of the Second World War and the large amount of war housing constructed directly or indirectly by the government.”⁶

The Referendum of 1952

Passage of the Housing Act of 1949 proved to be a signal for intense local conflict over its implementation. Bitter campaigns were waged

“Public housing is still experimental, and the experiment has been very much confused by the intervening of the Second World War and the large amount of war housing constructed directly or indirectly by the government.”

—Senator Robert Taft

against public housing in Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Houston, Miami, and Akron.

At the same time, AMHA came under scrutiny to determine how many over-income families were still living in public housing and how many families on the waiting list really did qualify as low-income. Actually, many of the residents were veterans, and officials were reluctant to evict them because of the lack of decent housing, but the doubts continued about the housing authority's administrative abilities. Despite the insinuations, council approved the units, prompting the Akron Real Estate Board to call for a referendum against further public housing.

The National Association of Real Estate Boards had already been involved in campaigns in other cities and helped locally to organize Citizens Against Socialized Housing, or CASH. "CASH is a stooge for the NAREB," Lauer claimed, citing literature the group distributed that had the board's Washington, D.C., address on it. In turn, CASH accused Lauer of being overpaid and allowing Cole Avenue Housing to "get away."

The *Beacon Journal* wrote that the "CASH charges against AMHA and Lauer made for one of the hottest special issue fights in Akron in many years," and thought the race was too close to predict. But when the vote came up in August 1952, Akron turned down public housing by a two-to-one margin. "We underestimated the effectiveness of the real estate lobby," admitted the newspaper.⁷

Nationally, out of 60 such referendums, 40 were rejected and 20 approved. The combination of initiative and money from local realtors, along with the national guidance, encouragement, and coordination they received, proved effective against local housing authorities. "We didn't have any money to spend on a campaign, we couldn't," recalled Chairman Belcher.⁸ However, Akron was one of the few large midwestern cities to reject public housing, and the restrictive referendum badly hurt low-income housing for the next 15 years.

In 1953 housing remained scarce around the city and nearly non-existent for low-income families. Akron had fewer units of public housing per capita than most other Ohio cities, including Youngstown and Dayton. While the newspaper continued to print housing hardship stories, the president of the Property Owners Association of Summit County proclaimed that "public housing smacks of communism and socialism."⁹ In the era of Joseph McCarthy and his House Committee on Un-American Activities, these were strong words to fight against, and to fight again would require another referendum for public housing.

Mayor Slusser Goes to Washington

In July 1953, Eisenhower appointed Akron mayor Charles Slusser as public housing commissioner, heading up the Public Housing Authority for the country. The irony of his appointment was noted, as he came from a city that had defeated public housing a year earlier. "The mayor has taken little part in local public housing matters,

except to urge more of it for low income families whether negro or white,” wrote the *Beacon Journal*.¹⁰

Summing up the challenge he faced, Slusser commented, “Public housing long has been a storm center in Washington, with the ‘Real Estate lobby’ versus Senate Majority Leader Taft. Improving public housing relations with Congress and in hostile communities around the nation is the big item.”¹¹

If his own city proved to be any indication, Slusser had accepted a very difficult assignment. ■

Notes

1. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 19 August 1945.
2. Interview with Robert Turpin, January 1989.
3. Interview with Miriam Spiggle Lauer, November 1988.
4. Editorial, *Akron Beacon Journal*, 31 March 1949.
5. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 15 August 1951.
6. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 29 January 1949.
7. Editorial, *Akron Beacon Journal*, 8 May 1952.
8. Interview with Paul Belcher, November 1988.
9. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 22 January 1953.
10. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 6 August 1953.
11. Ibid.



Photograph, before remodeling, of Wilbeth-Arlington, the last of the war housing to be remodeled.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

The Quiet Years

1954 - 1967

After the conflicts in establishing the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority and the tremendous growth during the war, the 1950s and early 1960s were quiet times for public housing in Akron and across the country. President Eisenhower expressed little interest in it and when he “left the White House the public housing program was alive, but small, sterile and widely unpopular.”¹ Although John Kennedy pledged to meet the vision of the Housing Act of 1949, he initiated few real changes.

The field of public housing witnessed a time of transition. In major urban cities, high-rise apartments took the place of the row-house-style projects favored in the early years. The cost and availability of land for such projects was one factor, but the desire to segregate blacks in such buildings—especially in Chicago—was another. In St. Louis a concrete complex known as Pruitt-Igoe won national architecture awards for its design to house 2,800 families. However, Ernie Bohn warned that such housing would not work for families with children. Akron never built such high-rises except for senior citizens.

Some housing officials, including Public Housing Authority director Charles Slusser, took an opposite approach and began promoting “scattered sites”—homes and small complexes integrated into neighborhoods. “It gives people more of a sense of individuality and being part of a community,” explained a local expert.

Housing for the elderly created increased interest, in part because, as housing expert Leonard Freedman wrote, “It taps the only remaining reservoir of poor people who are white, orderly and middle-class in behavior. Neighborhoods which will not tolerate a ten story tower packed with negro mothers on AFDC might tolerate a tower of sweet but impoverished old folks.”² Congress first provided for housing of the elderly in 1956. The Housing Act of 1959 established three new housing programs specifically for the elderly, and in 1961 qualifications were eased for senior citizens to live in subsidized housing.

During the next decade, a gradual but major shift in constituency also changed the face of public housing. Initially, public housing had served white and black families that had fallen on hard times during the Depression, but often were of middle-class background and values. With the prosperity of the 1950s, families with more initiative worked their way out of public housing. This left the very poor, often African-American, mostly fatherless families in public housing, without the stability and leadership of the more upwardly mobile families.

Growing public resentment against special services for the poor caused Congress to curtail money for remodeling and rebuilding as projects deteriorated. At the same time, rapidly expanding urban renewal and highway construction programs displaced thousands of families, mostly the black or elderly. This forced exodus only in-

creased the demand for decent low-income housing. While these problems began to affect the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority by the end of the decade, for the most part the agency maintained a low profile in the community until 1967.

Referendum of 1955

Beginning in 1954, several city council members initiated a campaign to clean up Akron slums. While Akron did not have solid city blocks of slums like many urban centers, it did have scattered pockets of poverty. Slum landlords owned many of the old buildings crudely divided into apartments. Often they lacked hot water, central heat, or fire escapes. In one apartment investigators found a dozen people living in two rooms sharing one toilet with no tub, no shower, and no sink.

But to raze the dilapidated and condemned old buildings meant new housing had to be found for their unfortunate occupants, and in the city there was no available low-income housing. "It shows private industry didn't measure up and housing is needed," wrote the *Beacon Journal*.

Public housing went before the voters again when the Akron City Council agreed 13-0 in June 1955 to put the issue on the ballot so they could proceed with a slum clearance ordinance. "I don't believe public housing would be voted down by the people again," assured one councilman.

This time a Committee for Housing and Rehabilitation was formed to support the public housing "enabling" legislation and to fight back against the real estate interests. Drawing from diverse groups, the committee included members from the AFL, CIO, URW, the Council of Churches, the AAUW, the Federated Women's Club of Summit County, the NAACP, and the Jewish War Veterans.

The committee tied the housing not just to slum clearance but also to future plans for an expressway near the central business district, asserting a lack of housing would seriously slow relocation efforts for the families affected. Mayor Leo Berg used public housing as a campaign issue, promising the new units would be brick unlike the temporary war housing. Even the head of the Public Housing Authority, Charles Slusser, himself a former Akron real estate man, came out against the primary opponents, the National Association of Real Estate Boards. "They have taken a useful cow [public housing], painted it black and hung a socialistic tail on it."³

In the center of the storm, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, still stinging from the result of the 1952 referendum, refused to enter the fray again. Said Chairman Belcher, "I took an awful belt- ing the last time. I don't want any more of it."

In September, public housing once again failed in Akron, but this time by a narrow margin, 51.6 to 48.4 percent. Proponents blamed the loss on the fact Akron had such a high percentage of homeowners.



Additional housing was built at Elizabeth Park in 1956 to accommodate larger families. Inspecting the building is M. P. Lauer; his secretary, Mrs. Weyrick (right); and Elizabeth Park manager Wilhelmina Winston (left).

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)



The living room of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Nurse, who moved into the new building at Elizabeth Park after construction in 1956.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

A Few New Units

The loss of the referendums put the housing authority on hold. What federal funds it could secure went to remodeling defense housing and maintaining its projects. “Wherever it was possible to get into a field the referendum had no bearing on, we could do that and we did,” recalled Belcher.

AMHA did do some building during these years, using the money earned from the war housing rents for construction to get around the public housing referendums. African-American families benefited from two of the projects. In 1955 Lauer designed 24 apartments for Elizabeth Park with four bedrooms and a full basement to fill the needs of larger families. Later that year AMHA announced plans for 28 units to replace slums in South Barberton. Controversy reduced this project to 12 apartments, after taking four years to resolve. In 1962 AMHA lost units when the housing moved in by veterans at Margaret Park and Lane Field was torn down to make way for the West Expressway.

Housing for Senior Citizens

In 1955 Lauer attended a conference titled “Housing and Living Arrangements for the Aging.” He came back to Akron with an idea to build specially designed units at Wilbeth-Arlington for senior citizens.

The units would be unique, “not unlike the better-class motels

that dot the Florida East Coast and the far West.” They would be modified for older, handicapped people, with low cabinets and special bathrooms. “We want a place where older folks can live decently and independently without going to live with their children—when the old folks don’t want to do it and neither do the children,” said Lauer.⁴

Called Arlington Gardens, the 10 units opened in September 1958 to much praise. Up to this time, even nationally, little attention had been given to housing the elderly and almost no consideration to their special needs. However, for all its good intentions, Arlington Gardens fell short of its goal. Filling the units proved difficult because at the time Arlington Street was too far away from the services and friends older people needed. AMHA also limited occupancy to couples.

Undaunted, Lauer tried again in 1960 with the Cedar Hill Apartments, a two-story white brick building near downtown for single senior citizens. It proved to be a success and so another project was built at Pine and Chestnut Streets.

The agency then asked city council to approve a federal application for a seven-story high-rise for senior citizens, because the housing authority had run out of its own construction money. When the Community Action Council asked about more family units, Belcher blamed it on the defeat of the referendums and added that the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority was focusing on senior housing.

Life in the Projects

Each housing project, whether subsidized or former defense housing, operated in a similar fashion. A virtually autonomous manager ran each project. On staff were a cashier and a stenographer as well as several maintenance men, depending on the size of the project. Prospective tenants applied directly to the project in which they wanted to live. The manager screened the tenants, accepting only complete families. “Women with children but no husband give projects a bad reputation,” said Lauer.⁵ He also complained about too many pensioners: “The first thing you know we’ll be operating an infirmary.” Tenants paid their rent to the managers and called them for maintenance and repairs.

“The managers could get away with a lot,” recalled a former employee. “[The projects] were like little fiefdoms.” While the managers might have infringed on tenants’ rights, they kept the projects, for the most part, well maintained and the evictions down. This strict control kept AMHA better managed and better thought of than many local authorities—and the tenants in public housing were often given more rights than in most private tenant-landlord relationships, especially when it came to evictions.

The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority hired both women and African Americans for managers at a time when neither were



Arlington Gardens was Akron's first public housing for the elderly. Designed to resemble a modern motel, it boasted special features to make living easier for those with physical disabilities.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

often given supervisory roles. According to Belcher, after some discussion the board said, “Look, this is an approach that is coming, let’s do it. Let’s be a leader in this community and the industry.”⁶

Miriam Spiggle at Wilbeth-Arlington oversaw 600 families. Jeanie Luella Thompson, with a background in social work, managed Hillwood Homes for 10 years, retiring in 1955. Her involvement with the PTA led to the establishment of a kindergarten and a first grade at the project. Like a number of managers, Nettie Dalrymple began as an assistant at a project and moved up when a position opened at Norton and East Barberton Homes. When Elizabeth Park manager James Miller died in 1946, Wilhelmina Winston was appointed. She first came to Elizabeth Park when it opened in 1940 and worked her way up from cashier to assistant. During WWII she managed the Van Buren trailer camp.



Each housing development was similarly staffed, with a manager and office assistants. With Miriam Spiggle as manager, this is the office of Wilbeth-Arlington in 1952.

(AKRON METROPOLITAN HOUSING AUTHORITY)

“So we got women, we got blacks, we got minorities,” said Belcher. “We hired them and they did well. And I think they were dedicated.”

The interest, the money, and the response for social programs and activities at the projects quickly declined after the war and as veterans moved out. A few programs begun during the war continued, such as the weekly Well Baby Clinic at Edgewood sponsored by the Akron Health Department. Except for repairs, tenants maintained their own units, doing the painting and upkeep themselves. They cared for their own lawns and gardens, and AMHA held an annual lawn and garden beautification contest after giving tenants fertilizer, topsoil, and grass and flower seed. The first-prize winner received a lawn chair. When the Pinecrest senior building opened in 1963, Senior Citizens, Inc., which was meeting in the Krumroy building, was given a clubroom.

Racial Issues

As the demand for racial equality grew in the 1950s, public housing came under increasing scrutiny. The mobile unit evictions in 1953 raised the segregation issue at the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, and continued pressure by the African-American community about exclusion at Edgewood Homes kept the problem visible.

When in April 1954 an interracial group demanded the end to tenant segregation in Akron public housing, AMHA announced it would wait to act until the Supreme Court ruled on a pending case known as *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education*. In the landmark case the court ruled against the idea of separate but equal schools for blacks, banning segregation in public schools.

The implications of the case for local housing authorities who managed “separate but equal” projects placed them in a no-win situation. With tacit public support at best, if the Public Housing Authority mandated desegregation, they faced the certain loss of public acceptance and tax dollars. In fact, shortly after the Supreme Court

ruling, Southern Democrats in Congress, angered by the decision, changed their votes against public housing funding. The dilemma raised the question that continued to plague public housing: Were the agencies only to provide low-income housing, or were they to be an instrument for social change?

After the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, the Akron NAACP asked for Paul Belcher's removal as chairman of the housing authority because of his unwillingness to change. Belcher insisted that AMHA was following FHA policies on segregation and could not change them without approval from the government. In January 1955, the NAACP filed suit against the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority to end segregation in Ohio's capital. The next month, AMHA announced that Edgewood Homes would soon be accepting African-American families. In June, after Lauer had added 24 larger apartments to Elizabeth Park, the black-run *Ohio Informer* newspaper claimed the apartments were built "in order to salve us over so we won't be asking to move to the lily-white Edgewood." The paper added, "It is true that Paul Belcher is liberal about everything but something where one of 'us' is concerned."⁷

After the opening of Edgewood Homes to black families, racial issues quieted at the housing authority until April 1960, when city councilman Edward Davis asked for a written desegregation housing policy from AMHA. Only a few weeks earlier, Belcher had announced that at the new senior citizen building at Cedar and Pine there would be no discrimination against African Americans. "Integration at public housing here has been a slow gradual process," he added. Too slow for Ed Davis, who wanted a written policy that covered not just the one building for the elderly, but the family projects as well. Davis, the city's first black councilman, knew the problem firsthand, having lived in Ardella Homes after the war.

In August 1960, Davis' tenacity forced the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority to send the city council 25 pages of rental policy which said AMHA only discriminated against pets and applicants who refused to say they didn't belong to subversive organizations. The report did not satisfy Davis and the conflict continued until July 1961, when he asserted there is "very clear evidence the AMHA takes an extremely poor position on racial mixing in housing projects." Lauer replied by calling Davis a "troublemaker." "He wants colored people any place," retorted Lauer, "and that isn't going to work."⁸

Three months later Lauer retired as director of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority after 23 years. Two weeks after that, in October, the city council asked AMHA to pass a no-segregation policy and issued these warnings: "[The housing authority's] practice made it liable to a federal lawsuit," and "People have shown admirable restraint in not taking action [against AMHA] so far."

The housing authority assured council it practiced open housing. It reported that as early as 1940, when Elizabeth Park opened, it was 85 percent black and 15 percent white, but by 1942 it was all black because white families chose not to live there. Since Edgewood



A. W. DICKSON

DIRECTOR, 1961–1967

Allen W. Dickson joined the crusade for public housing before the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority was created. An early ally of M. P. Lauer, Dickson was first appointed to the board in January 1938 and was reappointed every five years until he became director in October 1961. Besides Paul Belcher, Dickson served AMHA longer than anyone else, yet his contributions were primarily behind the scenes.

When Dickson first joined the board, he was executive secretary of the Builders Exchange. Over the years he had served as president of Summit Hardware and administrator of the Tri-County Building Trades Welfare Fund.

Perhaps Dickson's greatest contribution to the agency, besides his many years of service, was the work that began under him for the construction of AMHA's first high-rise, later known as the Belcher Apartments.

Homes allowed open housing five years earlier, it went from all white to 80 percent black.

Finally, on December 8, 1961, AMHA passed unanimously a no-racial-discrimination policy, a full year before President Kennedy ordered discrimination outlawed in federally assisted housing.

A New Director

After 23 years, at the age of 75, M. P. Lauer retired from the organization he had founded in 1938. Under his direction the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority grew from one which could not afford to pay him a salary for the first year to one with a \$3 million budget and a staff of 80 in 1961.

Over the years Lauer gained a “reputation for hitting hard, speaking his mind, talking straight, and occasionally losing his temper,” recalled a colleague. “His reputation has him typed as a very kind-hearted man but slightly crotchety.” He fashioned the housing authority over much protest and often personal attacks. He oversaw the tremendous growth during the war and secured defense housing. Along with Belcher, Lauer courted regional and federal housing officials, ensuring that AMHA always had its fair share of the public housing pie even through the lean years.

A *Beacon Journal* editorial paid tribute to Lauer: “He was a man of vision and determination and he had the courage to fight for what he thought was right.”

After Lauer retired, the AMHA board appointed A. W. Dickson to the directorship in October 1961. Allen Dickson needed no introduction. He had joined Lauer in promoting the idea of public housing even before Belcher became involved in the late 1930s. Since 1938 Dickson had served on the AMHA board. He was administrator of the Tri-County Building Trades Welfare Fund and past executive secretary of the Builders Exchange. He was also president of Summit Hardware, Inc.

At age 67, Dickson continued to operate the housing authority as it had been run during the years he served as a board member. There were few changes between the Lauer and Dickson administrations, although Dickson dealt more squarely with the racial issues facing AMHA.

The Dark Side of Urban Renewal

Racial problems for the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority were exacerbated by federal urban renewal programs in the city. The federal government required suitable low-income housing for families forced to relocate, which Akron lacked. Some put the blame on the failed referendums that prohibited AMHA from constructing new family housing. The renewal projects also raised questions about segregation in Akron because many of the relocated families were African American.

In 1959 a lack of housing for 1,360 displaced people delayed work in the Washington-Grant Street area, just southeast of downtown. When the city created the innerbelt highway route in 1963 just

west of downtown, the issue of inadequate low-income housing came up again. In 1967 the urban renewal program south of downtown, known as Opportunity Park, also raised questions involving the housing authority when 65 percent of the 1,414 families displaced were African American.

Urban renewal, with its segregation overtones, brought the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority and many other authorities across the country to public attention. Besides the referendums' restraints and a lack of federal funds, public housing in Akron had gradually fallen into disfavor. According to new director Allen Dickson, many of the families relocated did not even want to live in public housing. Only 34 families out of 500 displaced from the Washington-Grant Street area program moved to AMHA housing. By 1967 only 1.5 percent of the 1,414 people dislocated by Opportunity Park were willing to move into public housing. The agency could not fill 20 vacancies at Elizabeth Park.

"They don't want project living," explained Dickson. "The day of the rowhouse is past. Anything we do in public housing except for the elderly must be on scattered sites."

A New Director, A New Direction

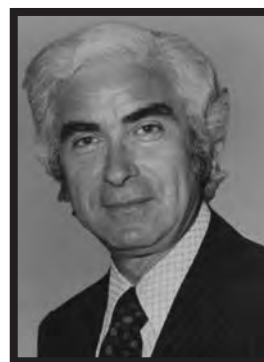
This dilemma and other increasingly apparent concerns brought the quiet years of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority to a not-so-quiet end in the fall of 1967. Because of his age, Dickson's contract came up annually, and in October 1967 several board members openly expressed concerns about renewing it.

Dickson wanted to stay another year before retiring and passing the agency on to his heir-apparent, M. Carl Bacon. Bacon had served the agency well since 1944, beginning as deputy director. Board member William Fowler regarded him as "a fine statistician and detail man." But said another, "Bacon has a lot of old habits and ideas that he claims are policy."¹⁰ While Bacon represented traditional-style public housing, new programs and new monies were beginning to flow out of Washington, D.C., available to agencies willing to try new ideas.

Some on the board felt that AMHA needed a "go-getter" for director, and the *Beacon Journal* saw a need for "energetic leadership to get the [federal] money." One board member, Jack Saferstein, felt that he fit the bill.

Flamboyant and outspoken, Saferstein had already earned a reputation as a "can-do" man when he was appointed to the AMHA board two years earlier. Raised in a poor family, Saferstein peddled fruit door to door as a boy. After graduating from high school, he started a small grocery store on Wooster Avenue. By 1958 he had become president of Sparkle Markets, which included more than 50 stores in the Akron area. In 1964, at the age of 41, he suffered a heart attack that changed his outlook on life.

"He began to count the hours remaining to him instead of the dollars accumulated, and he felt he owed his community something," according to the newspaper. Saferstein saw the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority as a way to make a difference.



JACK SAFERSTEIN

DIRECTOR, 1967-1973

Jack Saferstein managed to cram two careers into his 49 years. Both of them—as a businessman and a public official—were enormously successful. Because of his efforts as executive director of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, the Akron area is a better place in which to live. And that is the highest tribute that can be paid any citizen.

A child of the Depression, Jack Saferstein knew poverty and hunger and the need to work very hard to succeed in life. He also learned compassion, as his impoverished parents received aid from religious groups and the government. That background drove him to be an achiever, first as a prominent real estate and grocery executive and later as the man who turned Akron's lackluster public housing program into a nationally-acclaimed success.

Tall, lanky, an impeccable dresser, silver-haired Jack Saferstein could be abrasive or charming, whichever he figured would get him what he wanted. He usually got his own way. Controversy swirled about him, and he figured it meant he was making progress.

What made this complex man who had enough money to retire at age 40 drive himself in 18-hour days? He explained that when he faced open heart surgery in 1964, his outlook on life changed. He began to count the hours remaining to him instead of the dollars accumulated, and he felt he owed his community something. He spent too much time on the job, he admitted, and he used to fly off to Chicago or Washington to confer with Federal housing officials the way most people commute across town. He drove his staff hard, and his high-voltage operation wore out many people—including, finally, himself.

In the final few years of his life, Jack Saferstein tried in his way to do something worthwhile for his community and his fellow man. He did just that, and we shall miss this remarkable person.

Editorial, *Akron Beacon Journal*, 3/20/73

When it came time to vote on hiring their fellow member as director instead of Bacon, the AMHA board was split. Saferstein himself cast the deciding ballot in favor of his own appointment. Needless to say, this action caused considerable comment. The board then referred the matter to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which waived a regulation that required Saferstein to sit out one year before going from the board to director. However, they made the provision that Ohio law must be followed, which meant Saferstein would have to resign from the board so Akron mayor John Ballard could appoint a new trustee who would then break the tie vote.

Board chairman Paul Belcher opposed Saferstein's maneuvering. "The law provided we could not hire one of our members in any capacity and he wanted us to do that," Belcher recalled. "Nothing doing." To solve the dilemma, Belcher arranged a compromise whereby Saferstein would resign from the board and then the board would unanimously vote him in as director.

On November 17, 1967, Jack Saferstein became the third director of AMHA and began bringing dramatic changes to the institution. On his first day he averted a strike by 48 custodial employees, researched a family housing project in Barberton, discussed with developers the new federal "turnkey" housing program, and tried to make peace with Carl Bacon, who continued to serve as deputy director. ■

Notes

1. Leonard Freedman, *Public Housing: The Politics of Poverty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), p. 30.
2. Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Boston: MIT Press, 1983), p. 234.
3. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 12 October 1954.
4. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 22 March 1956.
5. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 9 April 1955.
6. Interview with Paul Belcher, November 1988.
7. *Ohio Informer*, June 1955.
8. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 12 July 1961.
9. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 12 October 1967.
10. *Ibid.*



During the Saferstein years, much attention was drawn to new AMHA building projects. This development at Biruta Street featured amenities like the contemporary-design playground equipment in the foreground.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

The House That Jack Built

1967 - 1982

If the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority named a golden age, it would be the next 15 years, from 1967 to 1982. Jack Saferstein, along with the directors who followed him, Herbert Newman and David Levey, created an ever-expanding housing authority that Akron pointed to with pride.

Rapid growth transformed the agency into a very different institution from that of its first 29 years. The number of units both for senior citizens and for families doubled, then grew again with amazing speed. Even the older housing projects received facelifts that left only the outside walls the same. Tenants could take advantage of trips, from the hairdressers located in their own buildings to bus tours of Washington, D.C. From infant stimulation programs to hot lunches for senior citizens, AMHA provided not just an affordable roof but an improved quality of life for more than 20,000 people.

The three men responsible for this transformation of AMHA—from an organization the *Beacon Journal* called “pretty content to be little more than a collecting agency for rent coming from WWII projects” to “one of the most dynamic public housing programs in the country”—shared a number of traits. Perhaps most importantly they brought imagination into the web of federal housing red tape. Following Chairman Belcher’s advice, they went after any available money for either housing or social programs. They gobbled up Akron’s share of the public housing pie and any other pieces they could manage to secure. They nurtured a close relationship with HUD officials in the regional and national offices.

They ran AMHA like a business, not as a governmental bureaucracy. Their management style was decentralized. They paid attention to the aesthetics of their buildings and to the needs of their tenants. They were skilled at gathering flattering publicity and kept the housing authority in the spotlight. They listened to chairman Paul Belcher and trusted his advice as he trusted their abilities.

Finally, Saferstein, Newman, and Levey all considered their jobs to be fun, creating an atmosphere of energy and expectations. And they provided housing, lots of it, all over Summit County.

Such a transformation was not overlooked nationally. The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority was lauded by HUD as a model local housing authority. Publications such as the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Business Week*, and the *Journal of Housing* reviewed AMHA developments. The agency even made it onto NBC’s *Today Show*. “It is a gem of a housing authority,” said Carla Hills, secretary of HUD.¹ “One of the most dynamic public housing programs in the country,” wrote the *Journal of Housing*.²

AMHA earned a reputation for getting action, and heavy mail from across the country poured in asking for advice. Early on, the press nicknamed the ambitious agency “The House That Jack Built.”

The National Scene

When Saferstein became director in 1967, tremendous changes were already under way in public housing. America's urban cities were exploding with violence and unrest. Policymakers viewed public housing as both part of the problem and part of the solution.

To stem the rise of this urban crisis, public housing featured prominently in President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." With his backing, the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 and the Demonstrative Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966 became law. With the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968, Johnson declared, "The Act can be the Magna Carta to liberate our cities." It promised 26 million homes over the next 10 years. For the first time the old nemeses of public housing—the NAHB and the NAREB—supported a bill for low-income housing because of the increased private-sector involvement the bill allowed and because of a nationwide building slump.

These changes provided more money than subsidized housing had seen before. Proponents hoped these new programs would cut costs, time, and government red tape. In Akron this proved true. In 1971 Belcher attributed the explosion of growth at AMHA in part to the changes in Washington: "There are just more possibilities to get federal backing now." But he also gave credit to the new director: "The zeal with which our executive director, Jack Saferstein, has undertaken his task has been a real key."

Saferstein was the right man at the right time to transform the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority.

Saferstein the Man

There was no doubt that Saferstein was motivated; the question was where did he get his zeal? His deputy director, Herbert Newman, felt that "Jack saw AMHA as a vehicle for his imagination." According to Akron mayor John Ballard, Saferstein was "go-go, imaginative."

A couple years into his directorship, Saferstein himself commented, "As a businessman, I felt our failure to provide good housing for low-income people was both unnecessary and tragic. I run this authority as I ran my business—except that my product here is better living conditions for people."³ He felt urban renewal was misnamed, better called "urban removal" because of a lack of concern for the people it dislocated.

When Saferstein was sometimes criticized as high-handed, he would answer, "My job is to build housing. I am sensitive to the needs of the people I serve and somewhat insensitive to the bureaucratic structure." Commented one builder, "Jack Saferstein is a special case. He may not be so hot on public relations, but he gets things done and that's what counts." Saferstein's outlook was, "It may sound dictatorial and smell of one-man rule, but by golly if what I've done to date in this community has alienated a lot of people and hasn't been acceptable to the so-called powers that be then I'm content to say the ends justified the means."⁴

In contrast to such strong statements, Saferstein felt that one of



Under Dickson, plans were announced for a new AMHA administration site that would allow the staff to be housed in one building. The first board meeting was held in the facility at 180 West Cedar in February 1968.

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the secrets of his success was his ability to work with the bureaucracy. “First I feel I have a good relationship with city hall, the mayor, the councilmen,” he said. “I maintain a good relationship with regional and national agencies. I always stay in contact on a day-to-day basis on each project, following it until it’s done.”

Unlike Lauer and Dickson, Saferstein visited the developments often, “just for the satisfaction of contact.” Site manager Robert Turpin recalled that “Jack was at the developments, I’d say, at least once a week. He would talk to everyone.” However, he was known to take his moods with him; one week he might spend some time chatting with a typist, but the next week she would be invisible. While these surprise visits were unsettling to the rather isolated site staff, they were appreciated and missed when Newman and Levey did not continue the practice as frequently.

Getting the Ball Rolling

As Saferstein began to change the thrust of the agency, its public face also changed. Two years after announcing plans for a new headquarters, AMHA moved to Cedar Street near a number of senior citizen housing complexes. The new offices allowed consolidation of all departments under one roof. In February 1968, the housing authority board met for the first time in the new building.

When Saferstein became director, Allen Dickson had begun to get the ball rolling on a number of new projects to take advantage of increased federal support. The Paul E. Belcher Apartments was the largest project and a dramatic step for the agency. Besides being

AMHA's first high-rise, the Belcher Apartments more importantly signaled a greater awareness of and commitment to senior citizens. The numbers alone speak of its importance: The building held 199 units, more than doubling the 82 units for seniors the housing authority had up to this time. AMHA's long-serving chairman agreed to the honor of having the apartments named for him, but stipulated that other board members would likewise be remembered with future buildings.

The Akron-based John G. Ruhlin Construction Company received the general contract for the high-rise, the first new building in Opportunity Park, a major urban renewal area just south of downtown Akron. Elderly who were displaced from the area had first priority to be placed in the new high-rise. When questioned about the effect of the 1950s referendums on the project, an AMHA spokesman replied, "The answer may be that helping poor old folks is somehow more acceptable to the general public than assisting poor young people."⁵

But Dickson also had investigated housing for "poor young people," through a relatively new concept called "scattered-site housing." First discussed in Akron by Charles Slusser while he was director of the Public Housing Administration, it was an idea whose time had come. "[Family tenants] don't want project living," said Dickson. "The day of the rowhouse is past. Anything we do in public housing except for the elderly must be on scattered sites."

These comments came in response to the startling statistic that only 1.5 percent of the 1,414 families relocated by urban renewal's Opportunity Park were willing to move into public housing. Several months later, in July 1967, when AMHA approved the request of city council to apply to HUD to rent 500 scattered-site homes, Mayor Ballard said, "In my judgment this is a very significant step for the city of Akron."

In a cooperative plan developed by AMHA, B. F. Goodrich made interest-free loans to area builders to construct scattered-site housing, which the agency would then buy. In 1968 it financed 10 low-income homes and 21 more the next year. Housing throughout the city owned by the agency, whether single homes, duplexes, or small developments with only a few units, became a part of scattered-site housing.

These two new Akron projects—the senior citizen high-rise and the scattered-site housing for families—reflected national changes in public housing. But Saferstein made the transition complete. His ambitions dovetailed with the Johnson administration's new ideas for financing public housing and the forms that housing took.

AMHA eagerly latched onto new concepts such as the "turnkey program" in which local housing authorities bought units built for them by independent builders. Explaining the program, Saferstein



The Paul E. Belcher Apartments was AMHA's first high-rise building. Only senior citizens were placed in the high-rise, thus avoiding the many problems faced by other housing authorities that put families in multistory buildings.

(AKRON METROPOLITAN HOUSING AUTHORITY)

said, “Builders submit plans. If we like ’em, we’ll contract ’em.” This approach was a far cry from the slower bidding procedure of the past.

The “Acquisition Program” promoted the scattered-site concept, where HUD provided funds for the housing authority to buy, construct, or renovate units which they could then rent out. AMHA worked through real estate agents to find the properties. The city could also buy homes and then sell them to AMHA.

Under a program known as Section 23, authorities could lease private housing to tenants, with federal funds paying the difference between the rent price and the rent the tenant could afford. By 1977, a somewhat similar program known as Section 8 had the landlord collecting the rent and AMHA paying the subsidy.

Building AMHA

When Saferstein took the helm, HUD money started rolling in. Money came in to buy and build facilities specifically for senior citizens. “Our system for taking care of the aged is in a sad state,” said Saferstein. “It’s catch-up time.”

And catch up the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority did. In May 1968, AMHA received \$2.1 million from HUD to buy two buildings off East Market Street, which became known as Buchtel-Cotter. The following May it received \$3.7 million for senior housing in both Barberton and Akron. The approval for the 213-unit Saferstein Towers, built under the turnkey program, came in October 1968. By 1970, Martin P. Lauer Apartments on North Howard Street were completed. That same year the agency bought Brittain Towers, eliminated the swimming pool, and converted the high-rise to senior housing, renamed Fred W. Nimmer Place. By April 1970, the housing authority owned a total of 1,072 senior citizen units. In July 1973, Cuyahoga Falls got approval for its first senior citizen housing project with a \$4 million grant from HUD despite a national freeze on federal housing funds. Known as Sutliff Apartments, this was the first building erected by AMHA in Cuyahoga Falls.

By 1971, eight senior high-rises had gone up, seven built by Thomas J. Dillon & Company. A local builder, Dillon used a concrete system he developed to efficiently and economically produce quality high-rises with precast concrete exteriors. “We probably handle more senior citizen housing through the turnkey program than any other builder in the country,” boasted Dillon’s development coordinator in 1971.⁶ In Akron they constructed Buchtel-Cotter and Brittain Place as private ventures and then sold them to AMHA. Their other high-rises—known as Dickson, Lauer, and Saferstein—were part of the turnkey program.

In June 1968, when HUD awarded \$2.16 million to AMHA to buy and remodel 128 homes, Akron became first in the nation for the amount of public housing building programs and federal funds received by any similar-size city. But Saferstein did not stop there. Six months later he received another \$2.9 million to build or buy an additional 187 homes. Six months after that, AMHA received \$4.4 million for 250 housing units, one of the largest grants of its kind

made by HUD to date. “This shows that what we’re doing here, we’re doing right,” said Saferstein.

Three months later, \$11.9 million came, the largest grant Akron had received. A few weeks later another \$10 million came from HUD for 500 housing units, bringing the total amount in federal dollars awarded to the housing authority in just two years to \$45 million. “The money is there for the taking,” said Saferstein. “You have to get there firstest with the mostest.”⁷

Saferstein did not ignore AMHA’s older housing projects. In February 1968 he got \$1.7 million of HUD money to renovate Elizabeth Park, Edgewood, and Norton Homes—providing new recreation areas, outside lighting, new kitchens and bathrooms, and trash dumpsters.

Ardella, Hillwood, and East Barberton Homes, all frame “temporary” war housing, had badly deteriorated and needed to be replaced. But before those projects could be destroyed, AMHA still needed to provide housing for the families living there. The Barberton City Council requested a phase-out of East Barberton Homes. Akron City Council was concerned about an integrated project with Ardella, a black project, and Hillwood, a white project, being torn down. In 1971 city council approved replacement of Hillwood Homes and, in 1972, Saferstein made the replacement of Ardella and East Barberton a top priority.



The “instant housing” units were constructed in Rochester, New York, and assembled on-site in Akron. While the process allowed AMHA to provide housing quickly, the construction methods did not hold up well over time, creating major maintenance problems.

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Operation Breakthrough

By 1969, even with the infusion of HUD funds, the housing industry still had not fully recovered from the 1966 credit crunch—so housing remained tight, especially for low- and moderate-income families. Housing prices went even higher with the shortage, so only one in eight families could afford the market price for a standard house. “We’ve been losing ground in housing, and the shortages will grow,” warned Secretary of Housing and Urban Development George Romney. “The existing housing supply is deteriorating faster than we are rehabilitating or building new units.”

To significantly reduce this housing crisis, Romney conceived Operation Breakthrough. Romney, a millionaire businessman from Detroit, took the idea of using preconstructed housing and created a high-profile program of promotion, production, and the hard sell. He tried to enlist U.S. know-how and capital in an effort to house low- and moderate-income families. He encouraged companies to submit plans for housing that was mass produced using assembly-line methods. Not without critics, however, the program faced problems of concerns with new housing techniques, community zoning and building codes, the opposition of craft trade unions, and the lack of land in many urban areas.

Romney found an ally in Saferstein, who played an early and important role in this project, believing such a system could save

money and time in housing the needy. Akron was chosen for a federal testing program using both module homes and the high-rises with precast concrete slab techniques. For the high-rises, AMHA worked with the Dillon Company, and for the module homes, Saferstein hired the Stirling Homex Company. These companies were two of only 22 builders in the country to receive initial grants with Operation Breakthrough.

After investigating a number of prefab housing companies, Saferstein selected the small but growing Stirling Homex, based in Rochester, New York. After Saferstein took local building inspectors to the plant, Stirling modified their buildings to meet the Akron building code. In December 1968 the Akron Board of Building approved the idea of prebuilt homes. Meanwhile, in Rochester, for the first time union carpenters agreed to work on modular homes at Stirling. Local builders protested: “Stirling units are chintzy and won’t last.” “Sour grapes,” replied Saferstein, impressed that it took only 10 days from start to finish to complete a townhouse complex.⁸

The first Stirling Homex structures, English Tudor-style townhouses, were placed on Summit Lake at Ira and Lakeshore Boulevard in February 1969. “Modules signal the beginning of a new era in low-cost housing for Akron and for the rest of the United States,” declared company president David Stirling. He also promised a plant for Akron by the fall. Saferstein saw it as the wave of the future: “It will be just like ordering a new auto in a showroom.”

Akron received national attention for the development on Summit Lake, including mention on NBC’s *Today Show* and an article in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Reporters, housing officials, and for-

Jack Saferstein's use of prefabricated buildings allowed the World War II housing of Ardella Homes to be replaced without having to relocate families for the interim, a lengthy and expensive undertaking. Saferstein renamed the development Joy Park.

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eign experts besieged the Summit Lake residents hoping to get insight into this trend.

Saferstein put up a number of Stirling Homex buildings, with the replacement of Ardella Homes the largest project. By using the “instant housing,” Saferstein was finally able to replace housing without having to relocate the tenants. Stirling Homex produced a promotional movie featuring families in Ardella Park (now renamed Joy Park), Saferstein, and AMHA. By September 1971, 600 Stirling units dotted Akron. “No city in the nation has come close to this,” boasted Saferstein. “We are the pacesetters.”

Like much of Operation Breakthrough, however, the Akron story did not end happily. Stirling Homex manufactured homes faster than it could sell them, helping to bring about bankruptcy in 1972. Because the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority was its largest customer, the relationship was scrutinized closely and Saferstein was called to testify. In a strongly worded letter to the editor of the *Beacon Journal* explaining the relationship, AMHA board chairman Paul Belcher stated, “The fact that Stirling Homex went bankrupt is a matter of deep regret to us and its collapse has given us many problems.”⁹

Saferstein faced other controversy as well. From April 1968 to August 1969, AMHA spent \$15 million to purchase about 200 houses, working through real estate agents. With so much money at stake, some agents protested they had been excluded. “[Saferstein] is not an easy man to get along with,” said one. African-American contractors also complained that they were not getting a chance to bid on AMHA housing projects.

Saferstein also ran into trouble in Barberton getting sites approved and by February 1971 stated he no longer wanted to deal with Barberton politics. The Akron School Board voiced concern about the new concentrations of children in some neighborhoods because of large housing authority projects while several other neighborhoods, such as Goodyear Heights, refused to have any AMHA housing at all.

The West Side Story

As the agency expanded, critics expressed concern about AMHA’s growing impact on the city’s housing patterns. Especially notable was the city’s west side, which was changing from a primarily white neighborhood to a mostly black one.

Urban renewal and innerbelt construction forced African-American families to migrate to the west side, joining friends and family already living there. Because the area was affordable, AMHA also bought up homes for “scattered sites,” but was then criticized for contributing to segregated housing by buying in African-American neighborhoods. Saferstein argued that the housing authority could not afford the prices charged in many of the white neighborhoods and then challenged his critics by asking if AMHA should be an instrument for social reform as well as improved living conditions.

The biggest uproar came in 1969 when AMHA proposed a housing project on Biruta Street near Wooster Avenue and Hawkins on

the west side. City council expressed concern about the quantity of AMHA housing on the west side, but after much debate gave its approval. The *Beacon Journal* proclaimed that AMHA had won its bitter and most important council fight. The Biruta neighborhood did not see the council approval as final and wanted city planning director James Alkire fired.

To fight back, a neighborhood group known as WHEN (Wooster, Hawkins, East Neighbors) began a referendum drive and in a dramatic last-day move delivered 10,000 names in favor of having the issue placed on the ballot. After the names were checked, however, WHEN fell short of the number needed and gave up the Biruta fight. Three months later, the housing authority project was renamed Bon-Sue after Saferstein's daughters Bonnie and Susan.

While the Biruta Street controversy was the most visible sign of continued racial tensions at AMHA, other issues and incidents plagued Saferstein. African-American board member William Fowler urged the agency to build scattered-site housing in middle-class neighborhoods. When AMHA bought a couple of homes in an increasingly integrated area of the North Hill, arsonists burned them down in August 1968. To fight against the notion that the agency housed primarily African-American families, Saferstein released figures in October 1969 that showed 55 percent of all applicants were white.

This was at a time when a number of developments were still segregated. Two years earlier the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* noted that South Barberton Homes was 100 percent black while Norton Homes was 100 percent white. To try to

remedy the situation, AMHA made its first major change in client placement. Since 1939, clients had applied directly to the development in which they wished to live. In April 1968, AMHA created a central list for prospective residents to sign up at the Cedar Street headquarters, taking away authority from the managers to choose their tenants.

A Tough Stand

While the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority rapidly expanded, it also worked to keep up the sites it already owned. A tough stand was taken on rent collection. "We've no inhibitions of evicting anyone regardless of their hardship if they don't live up to their lease," said Saferstein. The Community Action Council rightly accused AMHA of refusing to rent to applicants who had past records of not paying rent, and making inspections of the applicants' homes to determine whether they were clean. Yet, with the same standards, current AMHA residents who showed they could care for their units got



Construction of the Bon-Sue development on Biruta Street created some of the sharpest controversy Saferstein faced. West side residents protested, feeling that the public housing would adversely affect property values in their neighborhood.

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first crack at new housing, as Saferstein tried to develop more pride in these projects.

It wasn't until 1967 that AMHA considered opening all its housing facilities to unwed mothers. Because government subsidies covered only building costs, rent was used to offset operating costs. According to regulations, rent was determined by income, so local housing authorities had to accept more families who could pay higher rent. With the Brooke Amendment, authorities could collect no more than 25 percent of a family's income in rent. This cut in local authority income then led to the federal government also providing operating cost subsidies to make up the difference.

Dorothy Jackson and Human Services

If Jack built the houses, Dorothy Jackson took care of the people who lived in them. In 1968 HUD created positions known as Social and Tenant Services to deal with the social problems that plagued public housing, recognizing that housing alone could not relieve tensions in urban areas.

For the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority Saferstein hired Dorothy Jackson over college-trained social workers because of her energy and 10-year experience at Goodwill Industries. To ease Saferstein's reservations about hiring her, Jackson agreed over a handshake that she would work three months and if either was not satisfied, she would quietly leave.

For the next 17 years, Jackson was an integral part of AMHA and a national leader in human services. "Providing new housing is only the beginning," she said. "If you don't involve that person or family in social areas, you've defeated the whole purpose. We must have a program of social activity in all degrees for the family."

Often noted as an important component in the agency's success, tenant relationships became highly personalized. Akron's human service programs received national attention within the housing field and were profiled in professional journals and positively presented in the local media.

Jackson had a natural affinity for the tenants in public housing. She grew up just outside Ardella Homes and even as a child recognized the social needs that came from poverty and public housing. Her charismatic personality helped as she took on an advocacy role. "Dorothy Jackson was a very atypical person," explained a co-worker. "Dorothy somehow was able to get whatever we needed, whatever the tenants needed, whatever some people said could never be obtained."

"I guess I'm a glorified beggar," Jackson once said of herself. "Tell me about a program in the area and I'll see if we have an audience."¹⁰

Under Jackson, the Social and Tenant Services department grew to fit the needs of the residents and to take advantage of public money. Over the years the programs and personnel changed, but getting people to enjoy life remained the goal. During her first couple of years at AMHA, Jackson *was* the department, but with new programs and more money her staff and range of services grew. In time,

"I guess I'm a glorified beggar. Tell me about a program in the area and I'll see if we have an audience."

—Dorothy Jackson

the department had five representatives assigned to certain developments and buildings and an assistant, Terry Meese, who kept track of the paperwork flow. In 1981 Social and Tenant Services changed its title to Human Services, but still worked to meet the needs of both families and senior citizens.

Early in her tenure Jackson created *Scoop*, a newsletter for AMHA staff members. The first issue in August 1969 reported that the agency had received funding to conduct a nutrition center, child care, and a well-baby clinic at Edgewood Community Center. Many of the family programs focused on the well-being of the children and on parent education. They included upbeat opportunities like scouting, baseball teams, and dances along with more vital programs that dealt with drug abuse, alcoholism, and infant stimulation and care.

One of the first programs created by Jackson in September 1969 offered training sessions to teach new residents how to care for their homes. By 1974, with an expanded staff and a project named Homemaker Aides, Jackson received national acclaim. The aides were responsible for placing residents and conducting orientation meetings, discussing the appliances and furnace, and even recommending cleaning products. Perine Nealy, then head of the program, explained, “We go over everything from the floor to the ceiling in the unit they will occupy.”

One of Jackson’s favorite—and most successful—programs proved to be the Summer Youth Employment Program, which hired teenagers from the developments. During summers, they helped with site maintenance, as homemakers, and in the day-care center.

In the early 1970s kids from a much more privileged background worked with the housing authority. In the altruistic spirit of the times, three college students created the Summer Experience Center. After receiving a grant from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation for needy kids, Steve Snyder, Sue Rothmann, and John Earhart rented an empty greenhouse and painted it. But when they got ready to open, they had not found any children in Stow who met their qualifications. A phone call to Jackson provided kids from AMHA housing to attend the combination day camp and education center. So successful was the program that it was moved to Hillwood Homes the next year with the addition of playground equipment supplied by the NAACP.

Senior citizens, with more time and often more discretionary income, took advantage of an even wider array of opportunities—from ice cream socials to bus trips to the Cleveland Zoo, from exercise classes to the public library bookmobile, from nutrition programs to resident-operated snack bars. A Homemaker Service provided extra help to allow seniors to live independently longer, along with a hot meal program at some of the buildings. By 1979, the Home Service Program reached about 1,000 seniors a month. Geriatric clinics provided podiatrists, and hearing and blood pressure checks. Beauty and barber shops were put on site. Jackson even made services available for the hearing-impaired.

Bus trips for seniors became one of the most visible social pro-

grams. Joking remarks between the tenants and Jackson about a trip to Washington, D.C., became a reality in the spring of 1969. That trip was followed by others around Ohio and around the country, from Niagara Falls to Greenfield Village. To keep costs down, the seniors raised money between trips. When the AMHA bus overturned on a rain-slick highway in Seneca County, Ohio, in August 1975, resulting in the deaths of two AMHA residents, Dorothy Jackson wanted to call a halt to the program. But family members and senior residents were determined that it continue. An effort was made to purchase another bus, complete with a lavatory for the long road trips. A group of real estate agents headed the fund drive, but after a few months succeeded in raising only a fraction of the money. The imagination of director David Levey succeeded in securing a bus, by trading AMHA land to the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company in return for a bus the company had used to support the blimp crew.

Tenant councils for both the family developments and the senior citizen buildings became an important part of Human Services. “Each of our developments has a tenant council to plan activities and prompt involvement of residents,” explained Jackson. Residents voted on an executive committee that was governed by a constitution. Depending on the development, the councils varied in success and in activities sponsored, with the senior buildings proving to be more involved. By 1981, joint tenant council meetings were being held at Human Services for both senior and family residents, facilitating greater communication between the AMHA administration and tenants.

While the Human Services division staff developed a number of programs, many were in conjunction with other social agencies. Tenants and co-workers agreed it was Jackson, with her ability to cut red tape, who made the cooperative programs work. The Akron Health Department worked with the housing authority in clinics for both senior citizens and families. In 1971 three of the city’s 12 baby clinics were at AMHA sites. “We don’t actually treat patients,” said Dr. Paul Sauvageot, director of Public Health Medical Services. “What we do is counsel and advise and keep close contact with a tenant’s personal physician.”

The American Red Cross provided home nursing, and the Ohio State Agriculture Extension Office offered nutrition courses. The Western Reserve Girl Scout Council and AMHA cosponsored craft workshops in the senior buildings, with the girls learning skills from the older teachers. In conjunction with the home economics programs at Kent State University and the University of Akron, students worked with tenants one-on-one. AMHA’s facilities were also used



The first of many senior citizens trips toured Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1969. The trips stood as a symbol to many in the community of the quality of life to be found in public housing.

(AKRON METROPOLITAN HOUSING AUTHORITY)

for nonresident programs. Hillwood Homes housed a kindergarten and a workshop for the mentally retarded, using buildings at Wilbeth-Arlington. Wilbeth-Arlington, Hillwood, and Elizabeth Park housed the preschool Head Start program.

While some AMHA employees viewed the Human Services department askance, and few had any desire to work in the often spontaneous office, many others saw Dorothy Jackson and her department as the heartbeat of the agency. Commenting on Jackson's frequent involvement of other staff in her projects, especially the maintenance department, one staff member explained, "She had this unique way of helping to get their cooperation and yet let them know that we were doing this for the good of other people. They would laugh and say, 'Oh, it's Dorothy. Now what does she have up her sleeve!'"

Jackson encouraged her staff to serve on other committees throughout the community, believing that if people were receiving, they had to give. This philosophy also led to AMHA staff working out in the community. "She never lost sight of the fact that the individual tenants we served were the whole reason we were here and that sometimes the paperwork needed to wait."

An Impressive Era

By 1969, Saferstein had gotten the attention of Akron with his success with HUD. He said simply that the money had been there but no one in Akron had gone after it before. He said he preferred getting things done to spending time on idle chitchat and amenities.

In his first year Saferstein had opened the 12-story, 199-unit Belcher Apartments, bought Buchtel-Cotter Apartments, bought or built 128 scattered-site homes, and leased another 400 homes—opening up 879 units. "From a city that for 20 years did almost nothing to house its needy citizens, Akron has suddenly emerged as one of the leaders in the nation in providing public housing," wrote the *Beacon Journal*.

Rumors circulated that HUD wanted Saferstein to come to work in Washington, D.C. The B'nai B'rith awarded Saferstein its highest honor, the Guardian of the Menorah Award, the first given in Akron, in June 1969. "He's leading the nation," said Paul Belcher that same year when AMHA's newest high-rise was named Saferstein Towers. "He's done more for public housing in Akron in the last year and a half than any other authority in the country."

On September 14, 1971, U.S. Representative John Seiberling entered into the *Congressional Record* accolades for the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority and its remarkable achievements, noting that Jack Saferstein had been the agency's driving force for the last four years. It recorded that Saferstein, a self-made businessman, had applied business methods and his dynamic personality to spur a rapid acceleration in public housing for low-income families and senior citizens.

Despite all this success, Saferstein compared being head of AMHA to fighting quicksand: "Quick as things are built, more people need housing." He also reflected, "Sometimes the attitude of the general

public depresses me. With all that's happened in the last five years in social upheaval, we still seem to have the [anti-]attitude."

The Next Generation

Jack Saferstein died on March 19, 1973—of a heart attack at age 49—devastating AMHA's staff. The search committee moved quickly and in June hired Herbert Newman to fill the void.

A familiar face at AMHA, Newman started working with the housing authority soon after his graduation from the University of Akron's law school in 1968, doing the rather uninspiring tasks of evictions, small legal work, and collections. But with the advent of the turnkey program, Newman began earning what would become a national reputation for his skill in subsidized housing financing. In 1971 he served as Saferstein's deputy but resigned after a year because "the housing authority is really a director-run organization." Newman continued to do a great deal of consulting work for AMHA, constituting about 60 percent of his business.

Newman seemed the logical choice for director, chosen from eight other candidates. According to Newman, Chairman Belcher's advice was just like that given to Saferstein: "When I become the director, my instructions are to get all the money that's coming to Akron, Ohio, and to get all the money for Akron that's coming to everyone else." He also recalled Belcher's words, "The world was your apple and all you had to do was take a bite out of it. Also I would always do good for myself if I did good for the tenants."¹¹ Newman took a pay cut to head AMHA. "I don't regret it," he reflected. "At age 33, it was one of few chances for a guy that young to make a significant impact on the community."

Newman continued to improve the agency's reputation as a model public housing authority. He shared Saferstein's flamboyant and aggressive style. Said one HUD official, "Sure [Newman's] overbearing, but assertiveness is to AMHA's credit. They've got a good reputation nationwide." Another added, "AMHA officials are promoters, short on modesty and proud of accomplishments." HUD secretary Carla Hills agreed that AMHA and Newman "get an A+ for effectively utilizing HUD programs to deliver public housing to Akron area residents."

As a lawyer, Newman had an extra edge in dealing with HUD. Besides his stature as director, he could also go to the legal department and speak their language. Newman sometimes told a story of meeting an old Roosevelt "New Dealer" in Washington who suggested that Newman read certain sections of the housing code which stated that local housing authorities are tax-free. Newman built on the idea to pioneer a new vehicle to finance public housing: the tax-free mortgage. Bond attorneys soon sought AMHA's advice on these "tax-free bonds."

When President Richard Nixon halted public housing building in 1973 and supported the Section 8 program, Newman conceived methods so that the programs could benefit AMHA. By 1976, using the tax-free bonds, Newman began overseeing a \$19 million con-



HERBERT NEWMAN
DIRECTOR, 1973–1978

Following the untimely death of Jack Saferstein, Herbert Newman was the easy choice from a field of eight to become head of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority. Besides having served as Saferstein's deputy for a year in 1970, Newman served as legal counsel for five years and was instrumental in the financial arrangements for the ever-expanding agency.

An Akron native, Newman received his undergraduate degree in economics from Ohio State University and a law degree from the University of Akron. He continued to develop AMHA in a flamboyant style that rivaled Saferstein's. The *Beacon Journal* once commented, "If Herbert Newman is overbearing, arrogant and abrasive, as he has been described, then Akron and the country need more overbearing, arrogant and abrasive leaders."

When Newman resigned to become chief legal counsel in 1978, he was among the highest paid directors in the nation. He continued to work with successor David Levey to further develop AMHA into one of the finest public housing authorities in the country. As director, Newman felt his greatest accomplishment was giving "tenants dignity and respect."

struction plan, made even more impressive by the fact that public housing construction was at a national standstill under the 1974 Federal Housing Act.

In October 1974, Newman presented his first major project, the Parade of Urban Affordable Homes. Born of necessity, the project gained national press coverage for the housing authority. Public resistance had prevented AMHA from building on a site it had owned in Goodyear Heights for eight years. When Newman proposed a multiple-family housing project for the Orchard Park area, it met with much hostility. So Newman came up with the idea of the “Parade.”

The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, in conjunction with the Home Builders Association of Greater Akron, announced a design competition for single-family housing. The houses had to be consistent with the character and quality of existing homes, but the cost could range only from \$25,000 to \$35,000, below the national average of \$44,000. They received 35 entries and constructed 12 winning designs. The split-level and ranch homes with elements like cathedral ceilings, skylights, balconies, and walkout decks were a far cry from the original row houses AMHA had constructed in 1939.

After construction, like the houses in other parades of homes, they were opened to the public. A crowd of 6,000 came to tour AMHA public housing, paying \$1 each for the privilege. No other agency in the country had sponsored such an event. The *Beacon Journal* commented that the concept was the key to bringing badly needed public housing to scattered sites in Akron suburbs. “Projects like the Urban Affordables put neighborhood fears to rest,” said the paper. “Besides easing neighborhood fears, the project demonstrated that a partnership between the public and private sector can fill the housing void.”

Cedar Metropolitan Housing Authority built two of the houses in the Parade of Urban Affordables. Named for the location of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, this entity was created and directed by the AMHA board to allow the housing authority the means to undertake special experiments in low- and moderate-income housing. It permitted AMHA to take advantage of opportunities not allowed public housing agencies under state law. Cedar Metropolitan Housing Authority was also used to take advantage of Section 8 certificates and allowed AMHA to gain more subsidies.

The agency also created Summit Metropolitan Housing Authority, a housing development corporation that encouraged private building of subsidized housing. This corporation issued tax-free securities and lent public housing expertise to create public/private partnerships. By 1982, this arrangement had provided housing for 2,000 people.

The creation of the Cedar Metropolitan Housing Authority and other financing arrangements by Newman reflected the ever-changing and decreasing funding for public housing from the government. From Presidents Johnson to Reagan, each administration proposed a number of housing programs, each of which had a different theory of why public housing was not working and promoted a different approach.

This changing stream of programs meant that local housing authorities had to be flexible and creative. For example, in 1973 the Nixon administration, disappointed by the failures in Operation Breakthrough and the ineffectiveness of public housing nationally, called a halt to funding. In its place, they tried a number of other programs, including a revamped Section 8. The ever-flexible AMHA took advantage of the program early, while other housing officials remained skeptical. Though the changing agendas of each administration affected the way AMHA paid for housing, it did not have much impact on the amount of building in Akron.

“Even though there was more or less money from different administrations, we always had most of it because we asked the most,” explained Newman. “We asked and asked and asked. We were grabbing every penny we could from the government.” Said HUD area director Paul Lydens, “That’s Newman’s strong point: bringing together developers and the financial community.”

Newman continued, as Saferstein had, to resist running the housing authority as a government bureaucracy. It was “very straightforward, you were expected to do your job,” recalled one staff member. Both Newman and later Levey found their work fun and challenging—an attitude that eventually permeated the staff. “I will never love a job the way I loved working here then,” said one secretary.

Running AMHA like a private business, Newman added extra touches to projects—producing high-quality brochures and slide shows, making true occasions of groundbreaking ceremonies, winning and dining HUD officials. In retrospect, Newman said, “You can’t run a public agency the way I ran it because ultimately somebody gets pissed off because you are flaunting it—you are doing too much—you are not doing enough.”

Newman resigned as director after five years to return to private practice, but the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority retained him as a consultant. Citing a personality that did not fit an administrative position, this arrangement allowed Newman to continue to hold all development capabilities, which was the work he most enjoyed at the agency. He named his deputy, David Levey, as director.

Levey had begun at AMHA four years earlier as a housing inspector. He moved up to deal with the Section 8 program. Little changed at AMHA when Levey took over, since he had a similar philosophy of public housing. “There was almost a flipflopping of roles when Herb stepped down,” said one staff member.

Even Levey admitted that sometimes it was hard to tell where Newman’s role ended and his began. Not as high-profile or flamboyant as Newman, Levey gave more attention to internal management. Both men were among the highest paid local housing authority employees in the country.

Newman and Levey continued Saferstein’s emphasis on aesthetics. Saferstein had the foresight to be concerned about the quality of environment when selecting areas to build. Other cities such as Cleveland used the least desirable, cheapest sites, which created a number of problems. Besides site selection, Newman and Levey em-

phasized landscaping, trees, and grass. Levey even named family developments built during his tenure after varieties of trees. Newman felt that for both the community and the pride of the tenants it was important that the housing projects be attractive living spaces. “Tax-payers always see the outside of the buildings and rarely the inside.” Neither director identified the buildings with signs as public housing, out of respect for their tenants.



The longstanding Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority tradition of good maintenance was vigorously followed, and the agency continued to enjoy a reputation for service to tenants. This was at a time when the “evils” of public housing gained national attention as the notorious Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis was demolished. “Anybody can build a nice building, but what does it look like five years afterward?” said Newman. “Ninety-nine percent of being an owner is managing it.”



Levey agreed. “The management is the secret,” he said. “A well-managed and maintained project leads to greater acceptance of public housing and allows dispersal of constituency.”

Saferstein’s emphasis on ties with the city was also maintained. “You can’t afford to embarrass elected officials,” said Levey. “Our cardinal rule is no surprises.”

Besides close contact with public officials, Levey also realized that good management requires being a tough landlord, and he emphasized stricter

Wilbeth-Arlington was the last of the war housing to be remodeled. In 1978, AMHA completed a \$7.4 million rehabilitation of the development, increasing the size of each unit and adding parking, recreational areas, and open space.

rent collection. To facilitate better relationships with tenants and staff, he hired AMHA’s first personnel management administrator, Dr. Leon Friedman, in 1980.

War Housing Still

The old war defense housing from World War II continued to receive attention and money. Renovating Wilbeth-Arlington presented the biggest challenge. Money and government regulations did not allow the buildings to be razed, but the small cinderblock units were no longer considered suitable housing. The \$7.4 million rehabilitation job “virtually left the smokestacks standing,” spanned 18 months, and involved relocating hundreds of tenants.

When completed, the development was reduced from 508 to 328 units, allowing for long-needed open spaces, recreation areas, and additional parking. Because federal money was used for the renova-

tion, Wilbeth-Arlington housing became subsidized—and for the first time, federal standards for rent applied.

Soon after Wilbeth-Arlington was completed, AMHA received the city’s approval to raze Hillwood Homes. In the winter of 1977, the last of the “temporary” war housing was removed, more than 30 years after its hasty construction. The following year, AMHA’s oldest project, Elizabeth Park, received a \$2.1 million facelift. Thanks to Congressman John Seiberling, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority was one of only 30 local housing authorities to receive the available money out of 158 requests.

New Old Buildings

Money to adapt historic structures became available, so the agency decided to renovate old buildings. Akron’s grand downtown hotel, the 1931 Mayflower, became AMHA’s first project. A private firm using FHA money poorly adapted the building for senior citizens after the hotel closed in 1973. When it failed, the building reverted back to HUD, which arranged with Newman to act as interim director. Their interest piqued, Newman and Levey approached HUD, with the blessing of the city, about taking over the management. AMHA arranged for a buyer and promised to assist in securing Section 8 subsidies and tax-free bonds.

The second renovation of the Mayflower began in March 1980. When it reopened in 1981, the project received praise for retaining

When the agency proposed to create senior housing at West High School, the close proximity of Glendale Cemetery was one of several reasons given by protestors for their opposition to the project. AMHA managed the innovative housing project until 1986.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)





DAVID LEVEY

DIRECTOR, 1978–1982

David Levey gained his experience in public housing as he rose through the ranks at the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority. Soon after graduating from Bowling Green State University, he began as an inspector and collected overdue rent. He then moved to the Section 8 program and on to administrative assistant and deputy director under Herbert Newman.

When the board appointed him director after Newman's resignation, they recognized that Levey had been handling most of the administration duties at AMHA for the last several years. It was said of him, "He's bright, intense, pushy, too meticulous about details, stern, and understanding—depending on the topic."

While Levey continued the public housing philosophy of Saferstein and Newman, he also began to focus on the ever-expanding administrative needs of the organization. Levey always kept in sight the importance of "making a house a home."

the integrity of the grand hotel while creating quality living space for seniors. The facilities included a party room, a game room, an arts and crafts area, a library, and a community room. Levey even arranged for a Lawson's convenience store to occupy ground-floor space because downtown lacked a grocery store. While the housing authority did not own the Mayflower, it maintained a management agreement with the owners, Transcon Builders, Inc.

The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority's next selection for adaptive reuse was not as popular as the Mayflower project. When the Akron School District considered closing West Junior High School in 1979, AMHA expressed interest in renovating the building for senior citizens. Originally built as a high school in 1917, the structure was located on the near west side, bordering the expansive, 150-year-old Glendale Cemetery. Detractors deemed it an unsuitable site because of lack of stores in the neighborhood, a high crime rate, and the questionable suitability of putting senior citizen housing overlooking a cemetery.

"The key to AMHA's success is not construction but an emphasis on social programs, maintenance, and creative management," said Levey. He viewed the school as creative management because, like the Mayflower, the housing authority would not own the site, only manage it and secure financing under Section 8. When the school board voted in March 1980 to close the school, renovation work proceeded. It took \$2 million and two years to convert the classrooms into 68 apartments. When West High Apartments opened in May 1982, the project became the first in Ohio and one of the first in the country to adapt an old school building for senior housing.

In a somewhat similar relationship, AMHA worked with developer Patrick Neiman to renovate the downtown Akron Tower Motor Inn with Section 8 money. They created a congregate care center, which consisted of housing for senior citizens that provided services between a senior high-rise and a nursing home. The hotel remained single-room occupancy (SRO) or, in HUD language, zero bedroom. Residents ate in a common dining area. Named the Herbert Newman Senior Resource Center, the project made public housing national news because it was the nation's first Section 8 congregate facility and one of the first in public housing. It opened on November 15, 1975, with 194 units. While AMHA did not own the building, it served as manager until 1981 when the arrangement was no longer financially viable for the agency.

As during Saferstein's time, AMHA recognized the need to provide increasing care for elderly tenants who could no longer care for themselves in the high-rises. The Herbert Newman Senior Resource Center was a moderate step in that direction. In 1978 Newman and Levey proposed their most ambitious housing project, an \$18 million development named Highpoint. Designed for land near Saferstein Towers, overlooking downtown, the project called for 420 units, including family units along with 300 senior citizen apartments complete with a life-care center. Money would come not from the government but from AMHA funds collected from

WWII housing, tax-free securities, and a syndication of the project for sale to private investors.

The proposal was a radical departure for a public housing agency. It never materialized. In that same year, however, just 10 years after the opening of the first senior high-rise, the Paul E. Belcher Apartments, the housing authority was landlord to 5,000 senior citizens in 14 buildings with a three- to five-year waiting list for new tenants.

Under David Levey, in 1979 AMHA began planning what would become the Dorothy Jackson Terrace. The 28-unit development exclusively for lower- and moderate-income handicapped residents and their families again broke new public housing ground. Named in honor of Human Services director Dorothy Jackson in recognition of her long-term commitment to the handicapped, the facility opened in 1982.

Besides new housing, AMHA expanded its own facilities. In 1973, with HUD money, the agency constructed a maintenance building, moving the Central Warehouse crew from a barracks-type building at Wilbeth-Arlington. That same year AMHA bought Sharp's Market on Wooster Avenue to convert it to a recreation center for nearby Edgewood Homes. Questions arose because the store had been a Sparkle Market owned by Jack Saferstein and was part of his estate. He had closed it after the 1968 riots. But the housing authority proved that there was no conflict of interest and radically renovated the market, creating administrative offices, craft rooms, and space for social activities.

Breaking Out

One of the most important legacies of Newman's tenure, which was greatly expanded under Levey, proved to be substantial developments outside Akron city limits. Besides that in the city of Barberton, AMHA had been unable to develop housing outside Akron despite the fact that the agency's jurisdiction since its founding in 1938 included all of Summit County except Sagamore Hills. The 1974 Parade of Urban Affordables made important inroads. "This should show that we can be a good neighbor all over Summit County," said Newman. In 1978, a tight budget year for the authority, HUD awarded money for 450 family units with the stipulation they must be built outside the city of Akron.

In just three years, from 1978 to 1981, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority built 382 family units outside Akron: 125-unit Honey Locust Gardens in Cuyahoga Falls, 72-unit Crimson Terrace in Barberton, 60-unit Maplewood Gardens in Northhampton Township, and 125-unit Pinewood Gardens in Twinsburg. All built under Levey, they carried his trademark, bearing names of trees. These developments moved AMHA family housing beyond Akron city limits, dispersing "public housing throughout the county to avoid creating socioeconomic pockets of lower-income people."

Public housing in Twinsburg was considered one of AMHA's biggest victories. For years the agency had expressed an interest, but the poverty-stricken area lacked the needed utilities to make

“When I first went up there [to Twinsburg], I couldn’t believe I was still in Summit County.”

—David Levey, reacting to the poverty in an area where people still did not have running water

public housing funding possible. In the early 1970s, political problems postponed the project further. In 1979, after nine years of negotiations, Levey announced building plans. “When I first went up there,” he said, “I couldn’t believe I was still in Summit County”—a reaction to the poverty in an area where people still did not have running water.

Pinewood Gardens, with 125 family units, opened on October 22, 1980. Sadly, less than two years later, on July 28, 1982, racial tension flared in the development. Although historically it had been a black community, AMHA integrated Pinewood Gardens. Officials blamed the incident on a lack of recreational facilities, drugs, hot summer days, and high unemployment.

Changing Tenants

If public housing financing had changed drastically since the early 1960s, so too had the tenants public housing served. “Years ago you could go down your applicant file and just about anybody you picked would be ‘decent people,’ you know. Those who were responsible,” recalled one manager. Another reflected, “Back then we had more double heads of households.” For the first decades of public housing, the developments were places “where decent people could live decently.”

Government regulations caused a change in tenants from a mixture of middle- and lower-class constituencies to the very poor. Public housing officials cite the Brooke Amendment as one of the most devastating. Most of the tenants were now on welfare, often single heads of household. Local housing authorities had little say in choosing the tenants they accepted, and had to follow a complicated procedure to evict uncooperative tenants. According to *Housing America’s Poor*, “The clear reasons for the decline of public housing are the shift to a policy of income-based rent determinations and a series of court decisions and federal regulations that altered the rules for tenant selection and eviction.”¹²

In October 1978, the American Civil Liberties Union claimed that the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, along with the city and the Ohio Real Estate Board, was responsible for the segregated Akron Public Schools. According to the ACLU, the schools would not be segregated if not for the actions taken by these three groups. This suit was in conjunction with a desegregation plan proposed earlier in the year by the Akron Public Schools. Most of the attention focused on the west side where African-American families had moved, especially after the urban renewal for Opportunity Park and the innerbelt construction and where AMHA owned much scattered-site housing.

When the case went to court, the housing authority’s lawyer, Eugene Oestreicher, countered that most of the schools were segregated before 1967 and AMHA’s scattered housing program. Long-term AMHA employee and former Edgewood Homes manager Audrey Dalrymple testified that HUD directed the housing authority to desegregate in 1959 when the first African-American family

moved to Edgewood Homes, also in the contested area. By 1968 it was 95 percent black when the remaining white families moved out after the riots. In April 1980 a judge struck down the Akron Public Schools desegregation plan, but AMHA was found innocent of intentional discrimination.

As a result of the lawsuit, HUD made the housing authority change a policy it felt prompted segregation. Up to this time applicants at the top of the waiting list were given three choices of units and an opportunity to live in the neighborhood in which they felt most comfortable. To combat this natural selection, and with the threat of losing federal money, HUD required Levey in November 1978 to institute a policy of applicants accepting the first available unit. This meant that if an applicant refused a unit, he or she would go back to the bottom of a three- to five-year waiting list.

In 1978 the list contained 13,000 names. A year later there was little improvement, with 100 people a week applying to live in AMHA housing. By April 1982, HUD recognized that the policy was unworkable and allowed AMHA to go back to three choices for prospective residents.

Track Record of Success

Both Newman and Levey continued the efforts of Saferstein, and the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority's reputation remained strong. In 1978 the HUD magazine *Challenge* wrote, "AMHA has worked for and won the reputation in Akron as 'the best landlord' in town." The *Toledo Blade* cited AMHA as a public housing authority that worked, in contrast to the authority in Toledo. It quoted area HUD director Paul Lydens: "AMHA is among the best because of good management, creativeness and aggressive leadership." The *Challenge* agreed. "Perhaps nowhere in the nation is there a better mix of the ingredients for successful housing programs than in Akron. . . . The AMHA has combined innovation, leadership, and a philosophy of dignity of the individual."

Federal HUD officials perceived AMHA as a leader with a high profile, progressive attitude, good publicity, strong financing tools, and respect from city government. While some local housing authorities resented AMHA's success and the unorthodox methods of its directors, others appreciated its pioneering efforts, especially in the area of funding methods.

Public housing took a beating in the 1970s with increased social problems and, beginning with Nixon's moratorium, decreased funding. The cavernous Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and Cabrini-Green in Chicago became synonymous with the evils of public housing—with the violence, vandalism, and vacancy that plagued the huge concrete high-rises. In cities like Cleveland, the local housing authority became a pawn in city politics. In Boston, tenants held a rent strike to protest the lack of maintenance and the dangerous conditions. Even smaller housing authorities like Toledo's suffered public-image problems. Small wonder then that HUD secretary Carla Hills called AMHA a gem of a housing authority.

"AMHA has worked for and won the reputation in Akron as 'the best landlord' in town."

—*Challenge Magazine*

The Beginning of the End

“The House That Jack Built” collapsed in August 1982, when the *Akron Beacon Journal* ran a week-long exposé accusing Newman and Levey of wrongdoing. This visible flailing publicized the behind-the-scenes turmoil that had been eating at AMHA for several months.

The primary issue focused on Herbert Newman’s dual role as private developer and as the housing authority’s consultant. The propriety of AMHA’s arrangement with Newman had been questioned occasionally but never seriously challenged. In early 1980, Newman had been part of the Highland Square area redevelopment, announcing he would build a senior citizen high-rise and then contract with AMHA. A West Akron citizens group questioned Newman’s ethics, concerned that it was “a moral rather than a legal issue.” The group backed away from any charges and Belcher claimed that AMHA needed Newman’s skill as he controlled the legal affairs and development efforts.

While the paper investigated AMHA for its story over eight months, political winds also were changing for the “golden agency” that had never been overtly political. It began when Paul Belcher was not reappointed to the board of directors by probate judge Willard Spicer. Belcher, who had been appointed every five years since 1938 by Republicans and Democrats alike, remarked, “[Spicer] is a Republican. I am a Democrat.” Republican Cuyahoga Falls attorney Warren Gibson was appointed instead.

With the sudden death of William Fowler in July, a month before the *Beacon Journal* story, the board’s old guard lost its majority. Letters to the newspaper’s editor blamed the drive to remove Levey on partisan political motivation.

Some claimed the politics came about because of disgruntled local builders. A few big companies, two based in Cleveland, were receiving a large percentage of the housing authority’s contracts. “Large Akron construction firms say they will no longer bid on AMHA contracts because they thought they had little chance to be awarded it.”¹³ The Akron-Canton Subcontractors Association also brought complaints. And there were a number of problems with the Mayflower and West High because of lack of supervision and audits.

These and most of the other complaints were answered in the AMHA Annual Report of 1982: “Contracts let out on bid basis, but following HUD regulation, make only a few major sophisticated developers truly qualified to do major subsidized housing jobs, a situation which exists nationally.”

Newman resigned as consultant and Levey, faced with suspension without pay, followed suit. The board then hired a prosecutor to investigate the agency’s former directors, and the county instituted a grand jury investigation. After 18 months of intensive investigation and hearings, neither Newman nor Levey was found guilty of any wrongdoing. While a HUD official had admitted back in 1977 that Newman had one main weakness—“He likes his friends a little too much”—the federal agency never uncovered any wrongdoing, either.

“I have a good feeling about what I’ve accomplished for the community,” Newman said upon leaving. “We’ve not only created a lot of jobs, built a lot of buildings, and planned good housing, but we’ve improved the quality of life for our tenants.” Later he added, “We really set AMHA apart as far as the people we served, and we also made it a financial powerhouse.”

The impact of the political upheaval and newspaper story on the remaining staff was devastating. “I think many of the staff never quite understood what was happening, in terms of all these major pieces of publicity that were going on and people being pressured to leave office,” reflected one longtime employee. “It was kind of like the beginning of the end. The agency has never really fully recovered from that.” ■

Notes

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5. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 23 March 1967.
6. “People and Homes,” 29 August 1971, p. 35.
7. “This Is the Housing That Jack Built,” *Business Week*, 13 September 1969.
8. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 16 August 1968.
9. Letters to the Editor, *Akron Beacon Journal*, 17 October 1972.
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11. Interview with Herbert Newman, November 1988.
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A Different Direction

1982 - 1992

After the resignations of Newman and Levey, financial administrator James E. Balbach was named interim director while the search for a replacement began. The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority received more than 200 applications for the job. On October 18, 1982, the board announced the selection of Janet B. Purnell—AMHA’s first woman director, and its first African-American director. Purnell, an elementary school administrator, had been in the field of education for 21 years. She received her master’s degree from the University of Akron and served on its board of trustees.

Purnell also had another qualification for the AMHA directorship: She knew public housing firsthand, having grown up in the agency’s oldest development, Elizabeth Park. It had been a positive experience, and she remembered the sense of community during the project’s early years. Board chairman Warren Gibson pointed to her “empathy with the problems in the community.”¹

A Change in Philosophy

After more than 15 years of the Saferstein management philosophy, Purnell brought striking changes to the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority. First, she reorganized the staff, citing a need to correct internal management problems. She transformed the rather loose administrative management into a very centralized one, with all decisions made by a core group. According to a senior staff member, Purnell “tightened up operations with a much greater amount of accountability and far less amount of flexibility.” She instituted systems of checks and balances.²

At the same time, Purnell encouraged greater communication among divisions and among staff members at similar levels, primarily through a series of staff meetings. She tried to break down communication barriers. She saw a real need for additional staff training and offered incentives for more education, hoping to foster greater ambition and professionalism, especially among the managers. Computerization of records, begun under Levey, also greatly expanded. Because of skyrocketing insurance costs, Purnell helped establish a self-funded insurance plan for the agency.

New Consideration of Building

Outside changes also affected AMHA. The conservative administration of Ronald Reagan, which sought to severely curtail HUD funding, caused a change in direction for many local housing authorities. Rather than fund more public housing construction, the Reagan administration promoted a system of housing vouchers first proposed under Richard Nixon. Eligible low-income families would receive a voucher for a housing allowance to present to a landlord of their choice. The limited funds available to local housing authorities paid for remodeling and modernization.

Alarmed by the severe federal budget cuts, local housing officials sought to ensure continued support of their properties. While serving on the board of directors of the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities, Purnell testified in 1986 before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Appropriations, lobbying for sustaining and expanding subsidized housing nationally. At the same time, AMHA organized tenants in a mass letter-writing campaign against federal budget cuts.

From 1982 until 1987, AMHA received \$20 million toward renovating and modernizing, reflecting HUD's focus on maintaining local housing stock rather than expanding it. The housing authority developed a five-year capital improvements project for upgrading its operations. Buildings from the rapid development of the late 1960s and '70s were aging, requiring major repairs. In the high-rises, falling plaster necessitated replacement with drywall. Waterproofing of basements at Joy Park Homes and window replacement at Lakeshore became a priority as the "instant housing" of the 1970s proved not as durable as originally believed. The structural defects in the aging Stirling Homex housing made the 900 units maintenance-intensive. In the older developments, health issues involving lead paint and asbestos required attention.

One of Purnell's early duties was to dedicate the Dorothy Jackson Terrace, a 28-unit apartment complex designed for the handicapped and their families that was proposed in 1979 under David Levey. It was the only new construction, begun in 1986 after an agreement with the city of Akron, which agreed to let AMHA apply to the federal government for 100 units in Cuyahoga Falls if the agency would upgrade its existing housing in Akron. AMHA secured funding for only 12 family units, which were built near Honey Locust Gardens. Named Vincent Lobello Lane after board president Vincent Lobello, the housing complex was dedicated in April 1988.

The housing authority lost units in 1986 when the management agreements with West High and Mayflower Manor were severed due to financial infeasibility. With Reagan's emphasis on "housing attached to the back of the low-income tenant," the Section 8 program doubled during these years.³ AMHA administered over 2,900 units of housing with more than 800 landlords, offering them special workshops and meetings to better facilitate the qualification process.

Staff Changes

The most visible changes occurred at AMHA when Purnell began firing senior staff members and replacing them with her own candidates. Personnel director Leon Friedman and his assistant, Rick Nixon, were the first to leave in November 1982. Purnell had worked under Friedman when they were both at the Akron Public Schools. She replaced Friedman with Frank Fela, a Republican. A month later Summit County's assistant prosecutor, Wayne Calabrese, another Republican, was named legal counsel for the housing authority. A number of other senior staff members also were fired, and almost all were replaced with Republicans.



JANET PURNELL

DIRECTOR, 1982-1988

When the AMHA board hired Janet Purnell, they set a number of firsts. She was the first woman and the first African American to serve as director of AMHA, and the first director who could claim firsthand knowledge of living in AMHA housing.

Purnell spent her childhood years at Elizabeth Park, AMHA's oldest development. She attended North High School and went on to get a teaching certificate and a master's degree in administration from the University of Akron. She was a 21-year veteran of the Akron public school system, serving as principal at several schools.

A visible figure in the community, Purnell was appointed to the University of Akron's board of trustees and in August 1986 became board chairman. Deeply involved in local politics, she served on the executive committee of the Summit County Republican Party.



EDWARD DAVIS

BOARD MEMBER, 1985–1995

Edward Davis came to the AMHA board after building an accomplished career as a labor leader, civil rights activist, and elected official. He served as board chairman from 1988 to 1990.

Active in the Democratic party, Davis was the first African American elected to Akron City Council, which he served as president. Upon retiring, he was appointed clerk of council.

Throughout his career and tenure on the AMHA board, Davis remained loyal to and concerned about grassroots issues. He always questioned the potential impact of federal and local policy decisions on residents and was a staunch supporter of resident services—especially those involving education, youth sports, and the elderly. He died in 1995.

Noting this personnel trend, the *Beacon Journal* warned Purnell not to fall into a political trap. The paper voiced “a distrusting feeling that politics plays too great a role at AMHA.”⁴ The frequent Friday-afternoon firings affected staff morale, and it took several years before the staff “suddenly realized that every Friday doesn’t mean somebody is going to leave.”

In April 1984 three former staff members, James Balbach, Larry Bramlett, and Leon Friedman, sued the housing authority, claiming they had been fired for political reasons. In Friedman’s case, Purnell claimed “philosophical differences” for the dismissal, while he blamed “politics, power, and patronage.”⁵ After a number of years in the court system, AMHA’s insurance company settled the suit out of court for \$800,000 on February 6, 1987, just days before the court ruled in favor of the housing authority.

The board also changed frequently during this period. Warren Gibson left in November 1983, serving only a year and a half. He had become chairman after the death of William Fowler, and his tenure saw some of the most radical personnel changes. Over a five-year period the board membership changed completely, a striking contrast to the years when trustees served several terms. Additions to the board included Ed Davis, AMHA’s challenger from the early 1960s. The first woman came onto the board in 1986, when Josephine Cross was appointed.

On Strike

In the early 1970s, AMHA maintenance employees joined the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). “Joining the union was one of those things you did at the time,” according to one member. “There was no specific reason for unionizing.”

Reason or not, people did get fired over union organizing, but management did not fight stridently against the union until the early 1980s. Soon after Purnell assumed her duties, AFSCME tried to unionize the “front office” clerical and secretarial staff. The union didn’t succeed, but in July 1986 maintenance workers went out on strike, picketing the main office on Cedar Street. They claimed that the housing authority wanted contract concessions, especially involving sick leave. They also accused the authority of wanting to break the union. The union was not broken, and the strike ended after 37 days when the AMHA board approved a 3 percent salary increase.

Human Services

The many personnel changes in the 1980s also affected the Human Services division when Dorothy Jackson left abruptly to accept a job with Akron’s newly elected mayor, Tom Sawyer. In January 1984, Terry Meese replaced Jackson, whom he had assisted for almost 10 years. Even before Jackson left, Human Services had been cut back and forced to focus inward with less emphasis on community involvement. “We tend to be changing our focus right now,” said Meese, “from the recreational kinds of things that used to be done in



the past, which were good, to a focus more that says our folks really need some help with basic life skills.”⁶

An ever-increasing percentage of AMHA tenants fought debilitating problems such as alcoholism, depression, and drug-related dependency. The housing authority even saw their elderly high-rise tenants become increasingly needy. “As we have gotten larger, and because we have more complex problems to deal with,” said Meese, “we can’t render the same level of service anymore.”

One of the more notable exceptions to declining social programs was Project Self-Sufficiency, an attempt to deal with the complex problem of helping single mothers escape welfare. In 1985 Purnell worked with Summit County executive John Morgan to successfully secure government funding for a program that combined child care, personal and career counseling, transportation, education, and job training and placement for single parents. A special component included a mentoring program, matching 50 single mothers in the Section 8 program with successful women in the community.

AMHA maintained the growing Summer Youth Employment Program, hiring 279 teenagers in 1985. It also ran the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), which provided one-time payment to prevent gas and electric shut-off or to restore service, but discontinued the program in September 1984 for reasons Purnell blamed on partisan politics under Democratic governor Richard Celeste.

The regulations of the Department of Housing and Urban Development gradually changed public housing. In 1987 HUD mandated that AMHA transfer families at Edgewood into units elsewhere. This ruling destroyed the sense of community in the development and led to an increase in crime and drugs, according to director Paul Messenger.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)



PAUL MESSENGER

DIRECTOR, 1988–1992

As the first AMHA director trained in public housing, Paul Messenger brought with him a wealth of experience. He began his career with HUD, then moved to public housing administration, heading authorities in Springfield, Ohio, and Little Rock, Arkansas.

Messenger also brought a personal understanding of public housing. For his first six years, like so many other children during World War II, he lived in public housing (in Hammond, Indiana) while his father was in the service.

Along with his broad background and experience, Messenger's informal management style stood in marked contrast to that of his predecessor. AMHA staff members agreed with an assessment of Messenger made by one of his former Little Rock colleagues: "He works well with all types of people; he has the knack of making everyone feel important."

While the Reagan administration cut funding for public housing, the waiting list for AMHA units only grew longer. Purnell closed the application window in February 1985. When it was reopened for a month after a year and a half, long lines of applicants waited for an opportunity to live in public housing; 685 applications were submitted for two-bedroom units. Yet as increased concern about the homeless dominated newspaper headlines, AMHA was able to house more than 20,000 low-income people.

Another Change

The court case over the fired senior staff members was not the only politically tinged challenge that embroiled the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority under Janet Purnell. In 1986 an employee charged that Purnell and personnel director Frank Fela coerced housing authority employees into buying Republican party fundraiser tickets. At the time, Purnell served as vice chairman of the executive committee of the Summit County Republican Party.

The complaint went to the Merit Systems Protection Board in Washington, D.C., which investigated the violation under the 1939 Hatch Act. While the investigation continued, Purnell remained as director, but long before the charges had even been brought, Feta had resigned his position to pursue private consulting. On October 29, 1987, the judge in the case ruled that Purnell be fired. Amid the allegations, a January 1988 *Beacon Journal* editorial called Purnell an "effective dedicated executive."⁷

Janet Purnell left the agency in April 1988, having served almost six years as executive director. After the case was appealed that summer, Purnell and Feta were found guilty of violating the Hatch Act and were barred from holding public office for 18 months.

The Seventh Director

Terry Meese, who had moved in to fill the personnel position after Feta's departure in 1984, became interim director. The board of trustees faced the difficult challenge of naming a new director who could restore confidence in AMHA and provide leadership to both the community and to the housing authority's beleaguered employees. The office received 275 applications, including several from high-profile political figures in Akron. The board deliberated in private, refusing to reveal the résumés to either staff or the *Beacon Journal*. To the surprise of many, on June 2, 1988, AMHA hired Paul H. Messenger—its first nonlocal, professionally trained housing director.

The appointment surprised Messenger, too. A veteran of public housing since the 1960s, he was very aware of the role of local politics in agencies and the frequent practice of hiring a party candidate, rather than an unconnected outsider. Messenger felt that "even with all the politics, the AMHA board had not forgotten what it was really about: providing housing."⁸

Unlike the preceding six directors, Messenger brought with him the experience of a public housing professional. He began his career with HUD in its heyday of the late 1960s and '70s. He served as di-



rector of two smaller authorities, in Springfield, Ohio, and Little Rock, Arkansas. He brought a more informal style, decentralizing AMHA's management.

When Messenger arrived in July 1988, he found an organization that wanted to do things well, but had lost sight of its goals. Unlike the previous administration, he did not fire staff members, although he did rearrange the organizational structure. His first priority was returning the agency to the basics of housing management, improved maintenance, quick turnaround for unit occupancy, and prompt rent collection. Since public housing remained out of favor with the federal government, Messenger prompted the agency once again to explore creative ways to fund more housing programs.

While Messenger brought back some of the management philosophies found at AMHA during the years of Saferstein, Newman, and Levey, the idea of public housing creating great social change was not one of them. After witnessing the tremendous changes in public housing since the ambitious programs of the Johnson administration, Messenger held few illusions, feeling that "public housing is still public housing." Even so, he began considering ways for AMHA to better serve other portions of the population such as lower-income working families and the frail elderly. Plans also included a program to assist tenants, especially female single heads of families, out of public housing and into homeownership.

Other issues that concerned Messenger because of their impact on public housing included the breakdown of families and the loss of a sense of community. As a professional with 30 years' experience, he was well aware of the toll that social problems of this magnitude can take on a public housing agency, its employees, and its reputation. In Akron, his frustration began to show.

"There is a myth that because something, anything, happens in public housing it is necessarily the fault or the responsibility of the

Beginning in 1985, AMHA closed the application window because of the overwhelming numbers of families on the waiting list for housing. When applications were periodically taken, lines formed like this one in March 1989. People waited in the early-morning cold for a chance to be placed on a list that could mean up to a three-year wait before they could move into public housing.

(AKRON BEACON JOURNAL)

public housing authority,” Messenger wrote in a scathing 1989 editorial response to a *Beacon Journal* story regarding crime in scattered-site public and Section 8 housing. “If you strip away the embellishments, our fundamental job is to provide a roof over peoples’ heads. We have no control over what people do under that roof, or in the surrounding neighborhood. . . . The housing did not create the family breakdown or the lack of any legitimate family formation to begin with. Most people have never seen a public housing unit strewn with garbage and human waste, with roaches crawling over a naked infant, with the teen-age mother and her male ‘visitor’ on the couch watching soap operas. . . .”⁹

Messenger lasted four years as AMHA’s head executive. When he resigned in June 1992, with an ulcer and high blood pressure, the waiting list stood at 5,000. Still, the agency’s seventh director made his mark. Under Messenger, AMHA reduced its vacancy rate from 12 to 3 percent and cut a six-month turnaround on vacant units by half. Messenger also helped iron out problems in the Section 8 program and initiated a more thorough screening process for applicants to help reduce crime. About 300 additional families were housed during his term.¹⁰

“He was a very intelligent man,” said Louise Gissendaner, board chairman at the time. “It wasn’t that he could not do the job. He had family and personal issues and, frankly speaking, he wasn’t functioning to the board’s standards.”¹¹ Messenger “knew everything there was to know about public housing, but he would have been more effective in a higher education setting,” said a former colleague. “His talent was looking at a problem in the system and beginning the changes to correct it. He wasn’t interested so much in the day-to-day as in how the agency worked.”

Any post in subsidized housing requires acceptance that there are problems even the most well-run agency can’t always solve, said Gissendaner. “I think one of Paul’s problems was that he’d been in public housing too long, and he just burned the heck out.” ■

Notes

1. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 22 September 1982.
2. Interview with Janet Purnell, December 1988.
3. Interview with Terry Meese, November 1988.
4. Several *Beacon Journal* editorials offered warnings about politics at AMHA during the Purnell administration. The two quoted here appeared on 2 March 1987 and 14 December 1983.
5. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 31 April 1984.
6. Meese interview, November 1988.
7. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 14 January 1988.
8. Interview with Paul Messenger, May 1990.
9. Paul Messenger, Editorial, *Akron Beacon Journal*, 17 November 1989.
10. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 19 November 1992.
11. Interview with Louise Gissendaner, August 1999.



During Paul Messenger's tenure, AMHA earned national recognition for instituting a mobile learning center. The "Computer Commuter" provides training to children and adults, visiting housing developments throughout Summit County. The program continues today as part of numerous educational services offered to public housing residents.

A Changing Time

1992 - 2000

Once again, Terry Meese found himself at the helm as interim director, this time for an entire year. While the board of trustees set about searching for the housing authority's eighth executive director, Meese strove to run AMHA efficiently, concentrating on maintenance and other day-to-day operations rather than starting new projects.

"In fairness to the new director, I didn't want to get all these irons in the fire and then find out he or she had different ideas," said Meese, adding that he did not feel particularly overburdened by the extra work or constrained by the temporariness of his term. As deputy director, he'd become used to filling in during Messenger's absences, "so the transition was far more smooth than you'd imagine."¹

But Meese, a staffer since 1975, noted that he did not put the agency on autopilot. In fact, he remembered 1992 as "a time when we went after and received a lot of grants."

That November, AMHA announced it would get \$9.7 million the following year from a federal program for comprehensive rehabilitation—renovations so extensive they require tenants to move. A new formula used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development had boosted the amount to three times the 1992 allocation, enough to remodel Belcher North, Belcher South, and Saferstein Towers I, as well as the Valley View and Summit Lake family developments.

The housing authority used a portion of the windfall to start a home-buying program with Akron that would give families with moderate incomes the chance to purchase homes owned by AMHA and some Section 8 units in the Madison-Peckham area. Under the plan, local banks provided financing while AMHA and the city made grants available for down payments and refurbishing. The program marked AMHA's first foray into homeownership.²

That same year, the agency also received \$751,349 from HUD to expand its drug education and prevention programs, \$123,102 for a joint venture with Summit County Children's Services to provide housing certificates for split families who needed only homes to reunite, and \$150,000 to check for lead paint and other potential hazards. A separate \$35,000 grant from the Ohio Education Department went toward hiring an additional teacher for the "Computer Commuter," the agency's 30-foot literacy-lab-on-wheels that made regular rounds throughout the developments.

Meese noted that grants such as these painted a picture of public housing's latest epoch: renovation (or demolition) rather than building, scattered-site placement instead of clustering, and a push toward homeownership, more social services, beautification, and education. Development money for new construction—the massive high-rises and mini-villages of public housing's prime—no longer existed. And there were those who didn't want it to. Among many private homeowners, the "not in my backyard" sentiment ruled.

Still, Meese added, the last seven years had seen “a number of initiatives, all of which have served to enhance the viability of the housing stock, and the credibility of the agency.”

O’Leary Becomes Director

Ray Kapper arrived at AMHA toward the end of its search for a new director, after the board—understandably wary of dazzlingly written résumés—had winnowed the nearly 275 applicants for Messenger’s post to an out-of-stater. One of Kapper’s first duties as a trustee was to interview the candidate, whose attitude made him uncomfortable from the start.

“He spelled team with an ‘i’—as in, ‘I’m going to do this’ and ‘I’m going to do that,’” said Kapper. “Well, you’ve got to have one guy who’s captain of the ship, but there is no ‘i’ in team.” He told his colleagues that he “couldn’t accept this person” and suggested they take another look at the handful of finalists.³

The weary board was hardly happy with this development, then-president Louise Gissendaner recalled. “We’d gone on a huge search. We brought in people from all over the country. We even hired a consultant,” she said. “Then, finally, we realized we had somebody in our own backyard, somebody who knew the city, knew how to maneuver here.”⁴

Kapper remembered reaching the same conclusion. “One day, I just thought, gee, Tony O’Leary . . .”

Anthony W. O’Leary, Akron mayor Donald L. Plusquellic’s deputy, reportedly was interested in heading AMHA when Janet Purnell left in 1988 but did not apply for the job. He didn’t apply when Messenger left, either, so board members moved to approach the quiet but widely known city official.

“We tried to have a very fair and unbiased hiring process,” said Gissendaner, who had known O’Leary for 25 years. “We had to speculate whether it was even appropriate to ask Tony to apply. Then there was the political angle. He was right under the mayor as head of planning and urban development, and we didn’t want to hear, ‘Oh, the mayor’s friend got the job.’”

There were other worrisome implications. “We were hours away from hiring this fellow,” board member Kurt Laubinger said of the candidate Kapper disliked.⁵ That O’Leary, who had never worked in public housing, just seemed to surface without application or résumé at the eleventh hour of a costly nine-month search flabbergasted those outside the agency’s inner circle. Laubinger recalled that the consultant was “furious” and warned other candidates might sue, especially those who had put job possibilities on hold while awaiting AMHA’s decision.

O’Leary was appointed AMHA’s eighth top executive—without criticism from any corner of the city, Kapper noted—in June 1993. “Now that I look back, [hiring O’Leary] was probably the best move,” said Laubinger, who went on to become board chairman. “But at the time, I didn’t agree with the way it was done.”



LOUISE GISSENDANER

BOARD MEMBER, 1989–1993

Louise J. Gissendaner was appointed to AMHA's board of trustees shortly after Paul Messenger's hiring in 1989 and was board president when Tony O'Leary took over the director's post in 1993.

Gissendaner joined Fifth Third Bank, Northeastern Ohio, in 1995 with more than 17 years' banking experience. As the bank's vice-president and director of community development, she worked with housing, community, and economic development organizations.

She served on the boards of many organizations throughout Cuyahoga and Summit counties, including the executive committee of Neighborhood Housing Services and the Glenville Development Corporation. Other board commitments included the Summit County Red Cross, Cleveland Action to Support Housing, Westside Neighborhood Development Corporation, Akron Community Service Center, and the Urban League.

A graduate of Kent State University, Gissendaner was deeply involved with nonprofit and fundraising activities. She served as chair of the first-ever "Women of Achievement" luncheon, which raised \$43,000 for the YWCA of Summit County program.

New Directions

From the beginning, Tony O'Leary knew his two main charges: to oversee the construction of AMHA's new headquarters on Cedar Street, and to ensure sound management of the team that would operate within, and beyond, its walls. "We want an organization that is accountable, that does what it's supposed to do," the self-described hands-on director said he was told upon taking the post. It was an era that saw presidential nominee Senator Robert Dole scorn public housing as "one of the last bastions of socialism in the world."

The mid-1990s was, O'Leary conceded, "a strange time" to undertake directorship of a public housing authority. Nationally, chronic mismanagement had compelled HUD to intervene in (or take control of) housing authorities in several major cities. Both Democrats and Republicans bemoaned government waste while trying not to relinquish the humanitarian sensibilities of the 1960s. Programs for senior citizens and children were easy enough to push through, O'Leary said, but response to other social service initiatives was mixed.⁶

Yet it was the more innovative programs that taught people to live comfortably in—and eventually move out of—public housing, O'Leary and his AMHA colleagues believed.

A number of the tenants had many children and no furniture, including beds, straits that were unheard of in the Saferstein years. They also had little experience with the myriad maintenance tasks and simple repairs all households require. Despite this, the trend among tenants was to want a single-family home whether it was government-owned or not. HUD, in fact, was pushing homeownership with special loans and affordable housing, an idea O'Leary viewed as "not realistic."

The average resident in public housing earned less than \$10,000 per year, had two or more children, was unemployed or underemployed, and had a hard time making the monthly rent—30 percent or less of gross income. About 90 percent of the units had female heads of household, many of them overwhelmed by the new policy that limited their time on government aid.

"Mainstreaming sounds like a good idea for people with means," O'Leary said. "But it makes no sense for people with small welfare checks and three kids."

More Than Just Housing

The seven-member Resident Support Services department run by Pamela Hawkins received its funding through HUD. Additional local money was allocated by AMHA's board, she said, "and that sets us apart from other authorities."⁷ Her position, director of Resident Support Services, was also unique to AMHA. So was the way her department's work got done.

The key was a cooperative arrangement—including the housing authority, other agencies, programs, schools, hospitals, and the court system—that offered what Hawkins called "birth-to-death services that would be really hard to provide without this kind of collabora-

tion.” These services included prenatal care and immunizations through the city health department, meals and activities for school-age children during summer vacation, self-sufficiency classes (including home maintenance), and youth recreation programs such as the Boys and Girls Clubs.

While the agency had offered Head Start in its housing developments for years, two newer community rooms were built with the program in mind, featuring toddler-sized toilets, infant accommodations, and other amenities such as playgrounds and computer stations.

The Computer Commuter mobile learning lab started rolling on \$150,000 in federal funds in 1992. Hawkins, the agency’s grant-writer, conceived the idea. The specially outfitted former recreational vehicle’s 10 computer stations included two touch-screens for residents who could not read or who studied English as a second language. AMHA was one of the few housing authorities in the state to receive an Ohio Department of Education grant to partially fund a certified teacher for the free service.

The agency’s other program-on-wheels was a Mobile Health Unit formerly operated by the Community Drug Board. In 1998 the Akron Health Department asked to use the vehicle, which boasted two exam rooms with modern medical equipment, a waiting room with a TV and VCR, and a computer system that allowed doctors to scan their notes and send patient files to the nearest emergency room.

One of the agency’s most innovative programs arose from one of its most pressing dilemmas: housing younger people with disabilities in buildings primarily occupied by senior citizens. It wasn’t simply a matter of generational culture clash, although some elderly residents did complain about unsupervised children and loud music. The older people reported strangers loitering in the halls, break-ins, gun-sightings, domestic disputes, theft, and criminal damage.

Although from a services and programming standpoint it was probably better to house seniors separately, there was nothing AMHA could do about it legally, according to Louise Gissendaner. At the time, about 400 disabled residents, including a number with mental disorders, lived among more than 1,000 elderly tenants. In some buildings, both groups—ironically, the two populations to whom public housing means independence, not dependence—lived amicably. But in others, the residents felt terrorized. The delicate predicament plagued housing authorities nationwide.

“We wanted to help all those who needed housing, and some of these buildings had old studio apartments that the elderly didn’t want, so we had to use them,” said Gissendaner. “The ones we could move, we did. But the real problem was, how do you make the seniors feel safe while accommodating other individuals who also need housing?”

In 1997 AMHA received a \$675,000 grant from HUD, part of which was used to hire two full-time service coordinators to help residents adjust and to act as management liaisons. The agency also began working with the Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Services Board, which provided a team of professionals to



KURT LAUBINGER

BOARD MEMBER, 1991–2009

Appointed to the board of trustees in 1991, Kurt Laubinger served as vice-chairman beginning the following year and was elected chairman in January 1998. A lifelong Summit County resident, he owns Kurt O. Laubinger & Sons, Inc., a family wholesale flower-growing business in Macedonia.

Laubinger attended Ohio State University and Bliss Business College, where he majored in floriculture and business administration. He is active in state and national professional organizations, served as a vice-chair of the Summit County Republican Party, and in 1999 was named the Nordonia Hills Chamber of Commerce's Citizen of the Year. His many civic duties include service on Macedonia's planning commission and zoning board of appeals.

Laubinger's business management skills and knowledge of community affairs proved useful in major AMHA construction projects and in maintaining the agency's fiscal integrity. Known for his attention to detail, he frequently visited public housing sites and was instrumental in recommending ways to enhance curb appeal in the developments.

handle crises after-hours. Hawkins met weekly with the doctor in charge (client confidentiality was maintained) and called this solution "a godsend."

The Resident Support Services department, whose slogan was "We're more than just housing," also oversaw the Family Solutions Start Program, a joint effort with local businesses to train residents to get and keep jobs. It, too, went out to the developments.

So did O'Leary, the staff, and the board of trustees. Upon his appointment, AMHA's director demanded the team take a personal interest, attending functions, visiting sites, talking to residents. "You can't effectively run an agency this size," said O'Leary, "until you get into the details."

The details, unfortunately, included the seemingly intractable problem of drug dealing and use. "The devastating effect drugs have had on society is magnified in public housing, and the consequences are far more significant," O'Leary observed. "In the suburbs, you have drugs in homes. In public housing, they're in the homes, in the hallways, and on the playground." Though Akron had seen its share of drug-related violence in public housing before 1992, the community was shocked and galvanized when three young mothers were gunned down at Edgewood Homes as their children slept.

AMHA avoided taking a big stick approach to lesser problems such as damage to apartments and late rental payments, but it followed HUD's zero-tolerance policy regarding drugs: eviction and, in the worst cases, permanent banishment from public housing. "We're seeing a much younger and much more hard-core group of people now," O'Leary said. "But there's a danger in broad-brushing. I've never talked to a young person who wants to be in public housing. At least, not in 'the projects.'"

Curb Appeal

It is not the job of a housing authority to change society's opinion of its tenants, but AMHA's new director did feel compelled to sway the attitude of some of his staff members. He was dismayed, for instance, when requests to tidy-up development grounds drew responses along the lines of "Why? They're just going to throw the trash back anyway."

To some staffers, the notion of curb appeal seemed frivolous against the backdrop of AMHA's brick-and-mortar and social work, and O'Leary's plan to plant flowers also met with resistance. He persevered, convinced the agency to beautify a few selected sites, and encouraged competitions for best design.

Since 1994, building management teams and resident councils have worked together on gardens that drew praise even from public housing's critics. "In one small way," O'Leary said, "this has changed the image of the agency." That was the intention. According to the director, of all the changes at AMHA since 1993, the most impressive was the staff's renewed devotion to its work.

"When you drive by our developments today, the grass is cut and there's no litter," AMHA construction director Thomas E. Gil-

bert, who worked for HUD before coming to Akron, said at the time. “A few years ago, you wouldn’t have seen that. Curb appeal is where it’s at now.”⁸

But neatness and gardens were only one signal of greater responsibility on the part of AMHA and the 20,000 occupants in its development and homes. In the late 1990s, the agency began demolishing or reconfiguring complexes to lower density and create more open areas.

The tradition of providing as many units as possible gave way to providing breathing space for tenants. In the mid-1990s, HUD lifted its one-for-one replacement rule and began letting housing authorities demolish units without having to build or buy units to replace them. AMHA took the change to heart. Terry Meese recalled the remarks of one HUD official: “If we gave an award for demolition, AMHA would get it.”

“People tend to gauge a housing authority by the number of units,” Meese explained. “It’s not so much a matter of numbers now as it is providing better existing housing stock and programs.” Thus, AMHA combined efficiency units at Saferstein Towers, thereby creating more spacious one-bedroom apartments. It might have cost AMHA \$300,000 in federal funds, but in 1996 HUD granted a waiver when AMHA petitioned to keep its full subsidy. “We’re trying to run AMHA more and more like a private business, so management has a stake in keeping the properties attractive and safe,” Meese said at the time. “The only way to do that is to have some sense of looking at these properties as your own.”

The philosophy extended to tenants. “One thing that sets us apart is that we meet with residents before we start building,” Gilbert said in 1999. “We show them tiles, cabinets, faucets, and pictures of what the units will look like when they’re finished. Then, they come back and tell us what to do, and we follow through.” The Comprehensive Grant Program, more systematic than the old Comprehensive Improvement Assistance Program, made it easier for the agency to keep its promises by eliminating unexpected drops in funding.

The destigmatization, and perhaps even the survival, of public housing depends largely on luring tenants with enough income to help pay the rents of those less fortunate. AMHA staffers felt nearer this goal when motorists driving by the beautified Summit Lake and other complexes stopped to ask about rentals without realizing they were standing in the lobby of a “project.”

“Let’s face it,” said Gilbert. “No one from Hudson is going to move to Elizabeth Park. But attracting working people is the key, and changing the environment will help achieve that.”

Jeff Wilhite, AMHA’s newest board member at the time, put it this way: “Making these homes assets, not eyesores, helps relations with neighboring homeowners, and gives the residents a sense of pride and the urge to keep their homes inviting. That’s why we need programs to help tenants become self-sustaining. It’s not just about capital improvements. In order for the whole concept of social reform to work, you have to give people the opportunity to earn their independence.”⁹



RAY KAPPER

BOARD MEMBER, 1993–1998

Ray Kapper served more than 30 years in city government and on dozens of community boards and committees before going into private practice as head of Kapper & Associates, a consulting firm. Appointed to AMHA's board of trustees in January 1993, he was elected chairman in 1994; planning for the central administration building began during his chairmanship.

Kapper's term was marked by his insistence that trustees and staff members see for themselves what needed to be done. He organized bus tours of the agency's properties and encouraged employees to think of themselves as part of a team by requiring regular reports and input. To boost morale, he began employee-of-the-month dinners to show AMHA's appreciation for its staff.

His many years as a civic leader helped foster trust between the agency, city government, and community organizations.

A Period of Fine-Tuning

Like Paul Messenger, Tony O'Leary did not begin his term at AMHA with an ax in one hand and a list of potential replacements in the other. Both recognized the agency's staff as a dedicated group of people laboring in a configuration that rarely allowed talent or experience to prevail.

"Tony didn't hire or fire," recalled Leonard Foster, vice-chair of the agency's board. "He observed and rearranged. There were people who weren't being used to their full potential. He gave them the opportunity, especially the ones whose work he *didn't* know."¹⁰

O'Leary studied what Foster termed "layers upon layers" of staff positions before coming up with a reorganization plan that named department directors and the managers who would report to them. He did not reshuffle departments, but split the more complicated jobs within them. He devised a "cluster" concept that grouped managers, maintenance workers, and support staff geographically into know-your-tenants teams, a move that also gave occupants better access.

Managers were assigned goals relating to occupancy rates, unit readying, rent collection, inspection, and customer service. In the late 1990s, a Columbus consulting firm was hired to teach staffers to respond with courtesy and helpful answers when tenants phoned or visited any of the buildings' lobbies.

"Tony came in with a professional attitude," Foster said. "That's not to say the staff wasn't professional before, but he treated them as professionals. He gave the staff more responsibility and the tenant councils more responsibility, and the residents more responsibility.

"It was a new day. I liked that."

It was not as if O'Leary had boarded a sinking ship, however. As Louise Gissendaner pointed out, "We had a great staff, some with years and years of service to the agency, and good solid management in spite of any personnel problems. Our finances were sound enough to allow us to do what we had to do. Everything was in place. All we needed was someone to pull it together."

Terry Meese described AMHA as simply more proficient since its reorganization. "It's like an orchestra used to practicing together," he said. "We went through a period of what I'd call real fine-tuning."

Meese attributed the remarkable occupancy rate, up from 89 percent in 1989 to 98 percent in 1998—the highest ever—to the staff reorganization and the resulting enthusiasm. In the occupancy department itself, for example, staffers automated vacant-unit reports and the then-laborious written application process, held group orientations instead of individual pre-application sessions, and began showing tenants not-quite-ready vacant units. The department also changed from offering clients a choice of up to three units to instituting a one-turn-down rule.

Plaques bearing the agency's new mission statement went up in all AMHA meeting rooms and offices: "The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority is committed to building stronger neighborhoods by providing quality housing options and professional ser-

vices for eligible residents of Summit County in partnership with the greater community.”

A common thread in AMHA’s success story was its employees’ belief in the work they did. “Most of us philosophically align with the residents,” Meese said. “A large majority of the families we help truly appreciate it, and they really don’t want to be in public housing.”

Major Capital Investments

In the decade leading up to the year 2000, AMHA spent \$71,923,530 to renovate its older housing stock. By contrast, only \$12,335,671 went into new construction—mostly single-family homes, units added to existing complexes, and relatively small structures such as community centers and laundry buildings. More than half of the latter figure, in fact, represented the housing authority’s \$7 million headquarters, although capital funds were not used.

“We build very little new now,” construction director Thomas Gilbert said at the time. “There’s no money to do that anymore.”

On the other hand, “renovation”—in the grand-scale terms of public housing—meant far more than modernizing plumbing and installing new kitchen cabinets. “These places not only needed sprucing up, they needed major improvements,” O’Leary noted. The bulk of the work, in full swing during the period of downtown Akron’s own rebirth, helped play a significant part in revitalizing the local economy.

The most involved project, and one of the most costly, was the \$10,581,000 comprehensive modernization of Joy Park Homes in 1999. AMHA worked with city officials to permanently close several streets in the development. Eight buildings were demolished, parking was reconfigured, porches added, and lighting upgraded to double the city’s standards.

A \$1 million addition to Joy Park’s community center had two entrances. One led to the maintenance and administration area, the other to a multiservice room for residents’ use. The separation of officialdom and daily activities was intended to provide a sense of ownership to tenants by removing constant reminders that they lived in public housing.

The massive restructuring came after meetings with Joy Park residents, who complained of cars speeding on the development’s through-streets and crime in its hidden corners. A CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) review helped plan the open spaces and cleaner sightlines that made residents feel safe, vigilant, and more apt to report suspicious activities. These changes discouraged crime, speeding, and consequent move-outs.

“Our biggest emphasis is on bettering communities as a whole, not just renovating buildings,” Gilbert said. Even so, much effort was directed toward making the developments look like condominium clusters.

The 1990s saw comprehensive modernization at Van Buren Homes (\$9,585,000), Summit Lake Apartments (\$6,212,700), Saferstein Towers I (\$4,600,000), Valley View Apartments (\$2,760,000),

Cotter House (\$3,194,000), Mohawk Apartments (\$2,865,000), and Bon-Sue Apartments (\$2,078,000). Norton Homes and Edgewood Homes underwent renovation at a cost of \$4,975,000 and \$3,109,000, respectively. Another major project was the \$11,700,000 modernization of Belcher Apartments in 1998. The 30-year-old development's namesake, civic leader and longtime AMHA chairman Paul E. Belcher, had died the previous year at age 96.

Other developments received repairs and renovations to exteriors, roofing, windows, balconies, baths, and kitchens. Surroundings were redesigned to create more green space. At Van Buren Homes, the housing authority spent \$60,000 to replace a tiny playground with four large play areas. And because space, green or otherwise, cannot always be created by expanding outward or upward, a total of 150 units had been demolished since 1990. An additional 166—

including 132 at the venerable Elizabeth Park—were scheduled to come down.

Existing housing acquired by AMHA in the 1990s included two developments totaling more than 70 single-family homes, the 206-unit Rosemary Square apartment complex, and Midtown, a 99-unit former motel, under the Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation program.

In 1999 the agency built its first new subdivision in 25 years, an allotment of 10 single-family homes named Roulhac

Circle after Joseph Roulhac, Akron's first African-American municipal court judge. The houses, built for \$1,035,000 to replace obsolete apartments at the site, joined the roster of 550 single-family dwellings available to responsible residents for rental and eventual purchase.

The AMHA staff moved into its new central office building at Cedar and Locust in 1997. The modern three-story structure, a study in massive windows and gentle ridges, replaced the agency's much smaller, 30-year-old administration building nearby. All housing services were located on the first floor, along with a large waiting room, playroom, private interview areas, and a multipurpose room that seated 125 people. The second floor housed administrative offices and the boardroom. The 16,000-square-foot top story was rented to a county social service agency. Parking spaces were doubled to 120 in convenient lots just outside the building's front and side entrances.

Because of staff size, the number of clients who could be seen simultaneously remained the same, but the new building brought efficiency to operations by consolidating employees and services previously located in four different sites. A new computer system and



The new central administration building at 100 West Cedar Street opened in January 1997 at a cost of \$6.8 million. The 48,000-square-foot building consists of three floors, one of which is leased to other government agencies. Construction costs were funded entirely from local funds accumulated over many years from various leases, interest earnings, and other fees. The administration building consolidated employees previously located in four separate buildings. Key features include a large surface parking lot for visitors, a large open lobby with play areas for children, state-of-the-art computer equipment, satellite broadcast facilities for staff training, and private interview spaces for applicants.

(BRUCE S. FORD)

other high-tech equipment, including a satellite that allowed staffers to train by teleconference, were also part of the time-saving centralization. O’Leary was rightfully pleased. “Virtually everything every modern office has, we have.”

During Paul Messenger’s term as director, AMHA’s staff grew from 232 to 247 full-time employees and from 58 to 99 part-time/temporary workers. Under O’Leary, the full-time roster remained steady (between 250 and 255 employees). The part-time/temporary staff, however, jumped to 130 during his first year and by 1999 stood at 141.

Getting Out of the Boardroom

The most difficult part of working in public housing, according to Tony O’Leary, “is never really getting done. No matter what the project, no matter what the job is, by the time it’s done, it’s time to start over.”

It did not help to work under the charge of an umbrella agency whose problems were, as Terry Meese put it, “self-inflicted via myriad regulations.” Local housing authorities had to constantly strive to keep up with HUD’s rules and learn “how to get from A to Z without circumventing them.” It did help, however, to have board members who understood that all this—and meeting the needs of the poor, besides—was too consuming a challenge to get lost in politics.

While the majority of AMHA’s trustees in the 1990s were Democrats, Kurt Laubinger, who became board chairman in 1998, was also vice-chair of the Summit County Republican Party’s Central Committee. The mix was both a break in tradition and, according to Laubinger, a sign that there was “no animosity between parties or board members. Ray Kapper broke down that barrier.”

Traditionally, the AMHA board chairman’s political affiliation matched the Akron mayor’s, while the vice-chairmanship went to the other party. “It was sort of an unwritten rule,” said Laubinger, who was surprised himself when Kapper, a Democrat, supported his rise to board head during Donald Plusquellic’s administration. Laubinger became the board’s first Republican chairman to serve under a Democratic mayor. There may have been hurt feelings—two Democrats were ahead of him in line for the chairmanship—but no one complained.

“Even though we’re all political appointments, we do not let party politics interfere with our ability to run the agency,” Leonard Foster said. “The clients come first.”

A hallmark of AMHA’s board of trustees became getting out of the boardroom. Along with monitoring HUD’s moves and minding the money, trustees visited sites, met with tenants, kept up with the many supportive agencies and organizations, and dealt with misunderstandings in neighborhoods that continued to fear public housing.

“Our problems here, knock on wood, have not been graft or misappropriation of funds,” said Dr. John A. Fink, appointed to the board in 1996. “They’re true problems that stem from the program itself. We are all very politically active. The key is, any philosophical



ANTHONY O'LEARY
DIRECTOR, 1993–PRESENT

After a nine-month nationwide search failed to produce an acceptable candidate, AMHA's board reopened the process and selected Anthony O'Leary as the housing authority's eighth director.

At the time of his appointment, O'Leary was director of planning and urban development for the city of Akron and had previously served as deputy mayor for the administrations of Akron mayors Don Plusquellic and Tom Sawyer. Prior to his appointments in the city's municipal government, he served as director of the Akron-Summit-Medina Private Industry Council and was an administrator of special programs for disadvantaged youth with the Summit County Board of Education.

The Akron native (who had received an undergraduate degree in secondary education and a master's degree in public administration from Kent State University) brought a broad knowledge of the community and proven administrative skills to the position of executive director. He directed the planning and construction of the agency's new central administration building and the largest number of construction rehabilitation projects since public housing's peak period in the early 1970s.

As a result of staff reorganization, improved business methods, and a focus on resident services, AMHA achieved its highest level of occupancy in 1998. O'Leary's vision and leadership positioned the agency for continued success and moved the organization into the new century.

arguments we have take place at a different level. We don't set HUD policy. We simply try to follow it.

"The agency is well run, we've had really very few complaints, and politically, we get along," he said. "I guess it is sort of unusual."¹¹

When Jeff Wilhite was appointed in 1999, he made a point of touring the agency's sites and departments. What struck him was a bootstrap attitude of "Help yourself," as opposed to "Here, we'll give you everything."

"The theme was responsibility," Wilhite continued. "There was lots of emphasis on assisting families with children, programs for seniors so they didn't become sedentary, programs to place clients in productive careers. What I saw happening was an ongoing effort by the administration to focus on long-term self-sustainability."

Foster pointed out that "while you think of most boards having members who are on there forever," AMHA's close-of-the-century board had fewer than 15 years of combined service. It was the sense of purpose, not the personalities, he believed, that provided continuity, responsibility, and involvement.

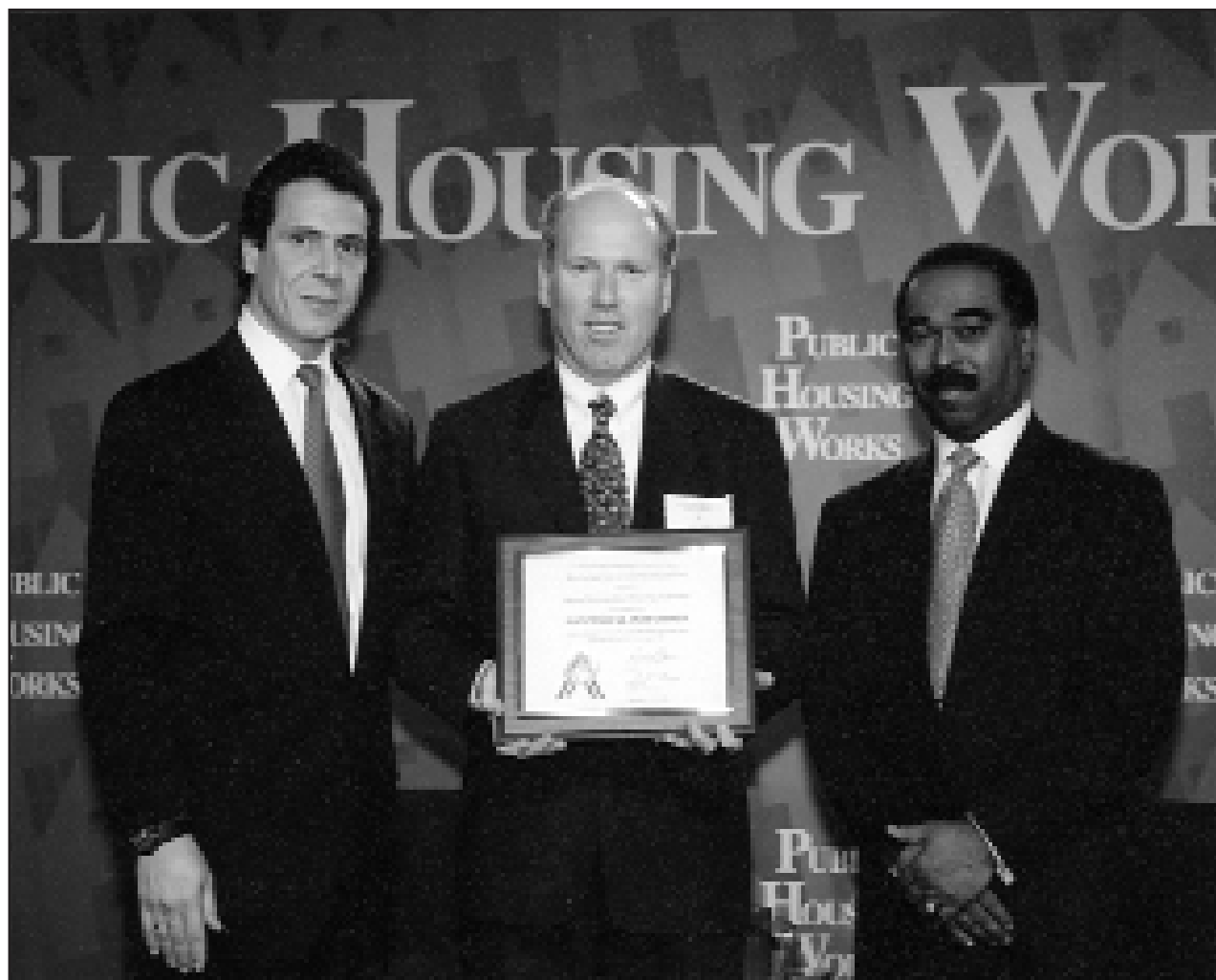
"There is no doubt that the board, along with solid staffers, is the secret of this agency's success," Louise Gissendaner said at the time. "If AMHA could bottle its process and distribute it among other agencies, we'd all really have something there. But you still have to get gratification out of what you do, even if you're looking at a building you've rehabbed—knowing that in 15 years you've got to rehab it again."

End of the Millennium

The final year of the 1990s began on a hopeful note. In February, President Clinton's proposed budget for 2000 included a \$2.5 billion increase in housing and job programs, the largest in more than 10 years. Akron was slated to receive an estimated \$25 million in HUD funds, and Canton \$9.4 million, from the 1999 federal budget—increases of \$3 million and \$1 million, respectively.

Then, in July, the House Appropriations Committee proposed \$1.6 billion in cuts that HUD secretary Andrew Cuomo warned would deprive hundreds of thousands of families and individuals of jobs, affordable housing, and vital housing assistance. Public housing authorities were used to these rollercoaster rides; nonetheless, the possibility of "Losing Ground," as HUD's report was titled, made for a disquieting summer. The deep cuts did not materialize, though, and by the fall HUD had advised the AMHA board that it would get roughly 95 percent of the funds it had requested. "It's a small cutback that bears watching," said Laubinger, "but it's nothing to worry about."

Since 1988, AMHA's operating expenditures, based on the number of unit types, had risen steadily from \$10.8 million to \$19.5 million. Comprehensive Grant funding for capital projects was not as consistent, nearly doubling from \$4.5 million in 1991 to \$9.7 million the following year when the funding system changed. AMHA received nearly \$12 million in Comprehensive Grant funds in 1994 and only \$9.6 million in 1998.



No one could predict the future of public housing, except to say that in some form or another, such assistance would always be necessary. “The population is aging rapidly,” noted Wilhite. “One of the most important things, to me, is not to lose your independence. A host of benefits come with independent housing for seniors. We have to start looking that way. It’s not a matter of choice. The next big challenge for all housing authorities is an aging society.”

An equal challenge was the one already embarked upon by AMHA: While public housing was never meant to be permanent, a sense of ownership is imperative to both the agency and its clients. AMHA and other public housing authorities faced increasing competition from private subsidized housing. “If your residents could leave tomorrow, would they?” asked Terry Meese. “If the answer is yes, you’re doing something wrong.”

The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority embarked on the new millennium by making history. At the December 1999 board meeting, AMHA trustees unanimously endorsed Tony O’Leary’s proposal to lease the Highpoint property to the Akron Zoo for a period of 99 years. The housing authority had purchased the land, then known as the Auldfarm estate, in 1978. The scenic 16-acre hill-top site is adjacent to the zoo and Saferstein Towers. Previous direc-

At a January 2000 ceremony in Washington, D.C., HUD secretary Andrew Cuomo (left) presented a plaque to director Anthony O’Leary in recognition of AMHA’s achievements.

tors David Levey and Herbert Newman had envisioned a combined family and senior housing development built with nonfederal funds, but neither the Highpoint project nor several other proposals were approved because homeowners in the area, including AMHA trustee Ed Davis, opposed development of the heavily wooded site.

Meanwhile, the Akron Zoo, under the direction of Pat Simmons, was undergoing a renaissance and had begun a long-term expansion plan. Simmons' talks with AMHA began in 1994. The lease agreement reached at the end of 1999 contained safeguards in the event the zoo's master plan was not pursued. AMHA viewed the historic donation of Akron's largest undeveloped tract, frequently sought by private developers, as critical to advancing the zoo's potential and, more importantly, to preserving and improving one of the city's oldest neighborhoods.

The closing month of 1999 also brought AMHA recognition as a "high performer," HUD's highest rating in the national public housing management assessment program. The evaluation process had frustrated AMHA in previous years, because older housing stock in many areas resulted in higher vacancy rates and excessive maintenance work orders. O'Leary and the board saw the "high-performer" distinction, which meant additional funding and relief from some regulations, as proof that their focus on renovation and staff teamwork had finally paid off. On January 12, 2000, HUD secretary Andrew Cuomo recognized AMHA and other housing authorities for their achievements at a ceremony in Washington, D.C. ■

Notes

1. Interview with Terry Meese, September 1999.
2. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 19 November 1992.
3. Interview with Ray Kapper, September 1999.
4. Interview with Louise Gissendaner, August 1999.
5. Interviews with Kurt Laubinger, August and October 1999.
6. Interviews with Anthony O'Leary, August and September 1999.
7. Interview with Pamela Hawkins, September 1999.
8. Interview with Thomas Gilbert, September 1999.
9. Interview with Jeff Wilhite, August 1999.
10. Interview with Leonard Foster, September 1999.
11. Interview with John Fink, August 1999.

THE NEW



CENTURY

2001 - 2013

The new century did not bring a windfall of money for public housing. In fact, it reduced the funding, and stopped most new construction. President George W. Bush did not favor public housing, and from 2002 to 2008 Congress cut the appropriations. He also placed the HOPE VI program in danger of being phased out when he left office. In 2008 the collapse of the housing market and the subsequent recession adversely affected all areas of housing and especially public housing. Although more favorable toward public housing, President Barack Obama was unable to sustain funding in the midst of a decline in federal revenues. He also faced a strong Tea Party-led coalition in the Congress that employed filibusters and a shutdown rather than compromise on the budget. The result of that standoff was sequestration, an agreement to cut revenues across the board if no compromise was reached.

Since their inception in the Depression years, federal housing programs have changed dramatically. In the 1930s the thrust was to build large, densely populated housing with plenty of playgrounds and open spaces. The housing usually was in rows and one or two stories high. Problems with the acquisition of vacant land in the late 1940s and 1950s led to the construction of high-rise apartments with no outlets for children. By the late 1950s most new projects were limited in space and location, and high-rise apartments were built primarily for the elderly. The civil rights movement of the 1960s made integration the goal, and the subsidy program that would become known as Section 8 was enacted under Lyndon Johnson. Section 8 marked a change in policy from isolating low-income families in developments to integrating

them into standard neighborhoods. They received vouchers allowing them to live wherever affordable housing could be found. This program grew dramatically under Richard Nixon, who favored more market-oriented solutions.

When Tony O'Leary became AMHA director in the early 1990s, public housing's reputation was at a low point. High-rise public



The central office building at 100 W. Cedar Street

(PHOTOS: BRUCE S. FORD)

housing, such as Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and Cabrini-Green in Chicago, had become notorious for crime, violence, and vandalism. Drug use throughout low-rise properties, which often served as drug-distribution centers, added to the poor reputation. Although Akron's public housing generally was not seen in this unfavorable light, Tony O'Leary's vision and leadership, coupled with a supportive board of trustees, enabled AMHA to adjust and excel during these difficult times.

Inspired by a father who provided legal services to the poor and discouraged prejudice, O'Leary has committed himself to finding housing opportunities and supportive services for low-income families. His master's degree in public administration and his experience in local government shaped his desire to improve the reputation of public housing, and to find alternative housing for those who are eligible. O'Leary believes in the power of entrepreneurship, particularly when it results in bold and innovative risk-taking that produces a worthwhile product. He points to the American auto industry and the Hoover Dam as the best examples of that quality. Rather than adhering to a strict definition of his job, he looks to provide more and better housing by responding to present political and social conditions creatively, working with partners locally, and seeking innovative opportunities.¹

O'Leary also believes in strong staffing with managers who are multiskilled and multitalented. One such example is his chief administrative officer (CAO), Sherri Scheetz. Before signing on as director of the AMHA Section 8 program in 2002, Scheetz had worked for 30 years in the affordable housing industry, including a successful stint as executive director of the Medina Metropolitan Housing Authority, which HUD designated as a "high performer." Under her leadership, the AMHA Section 8 department, now known as the Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP), moved quickly to a rating of "standard" and then to "high performer" from 2004 to the present. Through progressive assignments of additional responsibility, she continued to lead staff in the measurement and improvement of performance throughout AMHA operations.²

The AMHA board of trustees, whose members have professional or managerial background, is an important support for the administration. Despite political differences, they are all committed to a well-managed program of public housing opportunities. John Fickes, the present board chair, feels that each member "leaves politics at the door, and emphasizes running an agency that does the job for the community." The latest appointed member, Elisabeth Akers, finds the collegiality of the board "comforting to a newcomer." Thomas Harneden points to O'Leary's "outstanding leadership" as a critical component in gathering board support. Given the current funding, each board member is concerned about AMHA's future.³

HOPE VI

The HOPE VI program began at the same time as O'Leary's appointment to the directorship. The program's effort to respond to the



JOHN FICKES

BOARD MEMBER, 1998–PRESENT

AMHA board chairman John C. Fickes is an attorney. His work primarily concerns litigation, ranging from client-counseling to trial and appeal of lawsuits. He has handled cases in most of the area's state and federal courts and on behalf of a diverse array of individuals, businesses, and organizations.

Fickes spent several years in the late 1970s and early 1980s in formation with the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), Detroit Province. He was a history instructor at St. John's High School, Toledo, from 1980 to 1982.

In 1985 Fickes received his juris doctorate from the Case Western Reserve University School of Law. He holds a master's degree from the University of Detroit and a bachelor's degree from John Carroll University. He is a graduate of St. Vincent–St. Mary High School in Akron and was raised in the city's Firestone Park neighborhood.

Since entering the practice of law, Fickes has worked with many civic, charitable, and religious organizations. In 1998 he joined AMHA's board of trustees, becoming chairman in 2003.

negativity surrounding public housing paralleled O’Leary’s vision. As part of the new urbanism movement, HOPE VI’s purpose was not only to renovate the oldest developments, but also to diminish the stigma attached to such projects by building housing that fit into surrounding neighborhoods. Some of the new housing was intended for higher income and unsubsidized residents.

AMHA attempted to obtain HOPE VI grants, but initially HUD funded only much larger cities with more serious problems. However, a change in rules by 2001 opened the door for AMHA, which had been working with an architectural firm and a developer to create a master plan for the replacement of Elizabeth Park, the oldest public housing in Summit County. In 2003 HUD awarded AMHA \$19.5 million for the project. Located under the All-America Bridge, all-brick Elizabeth Park was still in good shape externally, but lacked the internal facilities for disabled and senior residents and included an aging steam plant that required replacement. Construction took place between 2005 and 2007. When the developer, The Community Builders, became the new manager of these properties, its director exclaimed that “the site is ideal, the setting is beautiful. I think this can become one of the premier rehabilitation projects in the country.” AMHA renamed the new development Cascade Village.⁴

The HOPE VI grants also emphasized support for educational and cultural activities reflective of the neighborhood’s interests, so AMHA joined with Akron artist Miller Horns in the creation of a permanent monument dedicated to the jazz artists who had played in the Cascade Village area. From 1930 to 1960 North Howard Street served as a center of jazz music with its nearly 100 bars and clubs. Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway appeared in these Akron venues, often staying at the Hotel Matthews, the only Akron hotel to accommodate black clientele. Horns wanted to commemorate these artists, and the many minority-owned businesses along North Howard Street. Concluding that the Hotel Matthews entrance was the most fitting memorial, Horns “took the essence of the entrance and . . . created this interpretive piece made out of bricks.” Visitors can press a doorbell to hear about the history of Howard Street. AMHA contributed \$5,000 from nonfederal funds toward the cost of materials as well as many hours of technical assistance from the construction department. Other Akron businesses joined in raising the \$125,000 needed.⁵

The Cascade Village project so impressed HUD that two years later AMHA received a second HOPE VI grant of \$20 million to replace Edgewood Homes, Akron’s second-oldest housing development on the near west side. Located between the Akron Zoo and the newly built Urban League headquarters, the project benefited from the proximity of Lane Field and the Helen Arnold Community Learning Center, then under construction. Edgewood Village was completed in 2012.⁶

During its transformation, Edgewood Village recognized the accomplishments of two Akron women by naming streets after them. Rita Dove, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and former U.S. poet lau-

Artist Miller Horns’ depiction of the Hotel Matthews commemorates Akron’s proud jazz heritage.



reate who lived in the Edgewood neighborhood as a child, liked the naming of Rita Dove Lane for her: “The term lane is filled with dreams, as opposed to street, avenue or road.” Mary Peavy Eagle was the first black woman to run for Akron City Council in the 1940s and a noted community leader and activist. Her daughter, Grace Richardson, was very proud to have Mary Peavy Eagle Court named after her mother, who died in 2005. These Akron streets were among the first to be named in honor of women.⁷

The Department of Housing and Urban Development eased the federal policy that any public housing had to be replaced on a one-for-one basis during their redevelopment. This new rule had the effect of reducing the number of housing units overall by 500. O’Leary endorsed this policy, however, because it allowed the demolition of units that were architecturally unsafe for residents. For instance, three-story walk-ups with common hallways in the Edgewood development protected drug dealers and sexual assailants. According to Craig Gilbride, formerly of the Akron Police Department, taking down those units helped to dramatically lower drug problems. The police department cited data showing that crime rates at Edgewood Village and Cascade Village were lower than those in surrounding neighborhoods.⁸

To O’Leary, both HOPE VI projects successfully transformed the image of public housing. He reported that people have asked incredulously, “That is public housing?” Paul Testa, who constructed the luxury Northside Lofts near Cascade Village, contended that he would not have participated in the project if Cascade Village had not been built in what was a still struggling neighborhood.⁹

Mayor Don Plusquellic gave his full support to both HOPE VI projects because he hoped to stem the tide of middle-class people fleeing to the suburbs. Plusquellic was “thrilled and happy, not just for AMHA, but for the impact it will have on the city, too.” He also has encouraged private builders to construct middle-class housing comparable to that in the suburbs on land acquired from the city through urban renewal. Testa Enterprises followed his lead by building homes for middle-class families in South Akron, as well as the more upscale Northside Lofts.¹⁰

Innovation

O’Leary identifies with Plusquellic’s effort to revitalize Akron through partnership with other public agencies and private businesses. Hence, he re-examined properties in the cities that AMHA served with an eye toward achieving revitalization rather than simply providing housing. Realizing that Norton Homes in Barberton,



Edgewood Village dedication of Rita Dove Lane and Mary Peavy Eagle Court, 2001. From left: Councilman Marco Sommerville, AMHA executive director Anthony O’Leary, Grace Richardson (daughter of Mary Peavy Eagle), AMHA board chair John Fickes, and Rita Dove



Barberton Middle School, completed in 2011 on the site of the former Norton Homes

their third-oldest property, was no longer viable, AMHA sold the property to the Barberton City School District, which built a new middle school there. AMHA board member Thomas Harnden was instrumental in facilitating discussion that resulted in this agreement. AMHA also leased over 10 acres of land near Edgewood Homes to the Akron Zoo for its expansion in 2001.¹¹

In collaboration with Barberton's city government and the Ohio Housing Finance Agency (OHFA), AMHA renovated Washington Square, a 24-unit apartment complex in risk of foreclosure. It was located in a low-income South Barberton neighborhood so threatened by foreclosures that the price of surrounding properties had plummeted in 2009 to a lowly \$10,000. In 1994 the nonprofit Neighborhood Conservation Services had used the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program, administered by OHFA to encourage construction of low-income housing by providing federal tax credits to investors, to build Washington Square. The property failed to maintain occupancy. Fifteen years later it faced the possibility of foreclosure, which occurred simultaneously with the foreclosure crisis brought on by predatory mortgage loans generated by banks and mortgage investors. These foreclosures peaked in Barberton in 2008 and 2009.

Concerned by the effect that a Washington Square foreclosure would have on the immediate area, especially if purchased by an investor who would do little to improve the property, the City of Barberton used a funding vehicle known as the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) to acquire the deed to Washington Square. The city in turn sold the property to NDS, a nonprofit developer, for renovation with the intent of later transferring the property to AMHA. OHFA provided an interest-free 20-year loan of more than \$1.8 million, and the County of Summit provided \$500,000 through NSP. This property is not public housing, but it is designated for low-income households that earn no more than 50 percent of the Area Median Income.

Washington Square apartment complex in Barberton

To prepare for the renovation, AMHA evaluated the marketing challenges that had contributed to the property's failure. Too many small three-bedroom apartments were one conclusion, so units were reconfigured to more spacious two-bedroom apartments. Privacy fences around the backyards and the addition of playgrounds boosted the ambiance.¹²

Thus, six different partners—HUD, NDS, the City of Barberton, the County of Summit, OHFA, and AMHA—cooperated in making the “new” Washington Square a reality. “Everyone involved in this project has had a phenomenal at-



titude, always keeping the project a high priority,” said Ryan Landi, then director of development for NDS. “Every partner has stepped up when they were needed and that has made all the difference in keeping this project moving.”¹³

In the nearby city of Green, AMHA benefited from the LIHTC program. Green’s mayor wanted senior housing because, he said, “many are living in mobile homes, many are low income and elderly women.” A local developer joined with the city government and AMHA in the construction of a four-story, low-income, senior citizen apartment complex. AMHA lent \$300,000 to the Green Retirement Partnership with the promise that AMHA would have 15 of the 58 housing units set aside for Section 8 voucher holders. Rent for the other 43 apartments was set below market value. Upon expiration of the LIHTC compliance period, AMHA plans to acquire the property and sustain it as affordable housing.¹⁴

More Like a Business

The financial stringencies since 2000 required AMHA to place particular emphasis on saving money and finding more efficient ways to operate. In response, Tony O’Leary turned to the Japanese model of *kaizen*, a philosophy of continuous process improvement involving staff at all levels. He hired Parkland Group, a consulting firm that emphasized a team approach through which staff met across department lines to analyze common problems and recommend solutions.

One example of this method involved AMHA’s application process, which initially took an average of 67 days to complete. Potential renters and voucher clients filed pre-applications, prior to an appointment to complete the full application. After applicants finished the full application, AMHA placed them on another waiting list. Meanwhile, some had already moved, and others were reluctant to come to the appointment. At a *kaizen* event, staff discussed ways to improve. They adopted a new process for “walk-ins” that allowed potential applicants to come to the office to apply, eliminating the pre-applications. Six months later, the rate of occupancy had risen from 96 to 99 percent.

Another example was inventory management. AMHA’s central warehouse stored items that might be needed in the future, but also included obsolete stock. Storing, managing, and tracking these items were more expensive than ordering from companies that could deliver in a few days. Thus, AMHA moved from a central warehouse approach to a Just-In-Time (JIT) supply system, which saved more than \$400,000. It also enabled AMHA to move two of the three warehouse employees to other work. “Lean thinking helped us achieve results that we would never have reached on our own,” O’Leary says. “It has truly saved us time and money.”¹⁵

Of course, the key technological development has been computerization. Once HUD’s reporting became automated, it took time to train personnel who had not grown up with computers. “Now,” O’Leary asserts, “virtually every employee uses a computer in one way or another.” Computers enabled employees to expose fraud, as

Fred W. Nimmer Place with rooftop solar panels for electric energy, 2011



well as track and analyze data. Housing managers could announce a vacancy even before it was ready, and thereby allow applicants to have quicker access. In the first year of online applications, the numbers increased by 48 percent. AMHA also computerized most of its forms, thus ensuring consistency. Online banking saved time and money by allowing owners and agents who participated in the voucher program to use direct deposit accounts. Computerization also fostered site-based budgeting that allowed property managers in 35 locations to manage and monitor their own budgets. Finally, it allowed AMHA to improve the consistency of contracts and products used at each development, such as locks, light bulbs, plumbing fixtures, and other materials.¹⁶

The construction department also changed dramatically, according to Laura Williams, a 30-year supervisor. Given the lack of funding for major projects, the department's emphasis turned toward preventive maintenance, energy conservation, and major mechanical systems. Employees and contractors have renewed elevator cars, upgraded electrical supply at all high-rise buildings, and begun replacing diesel-powered generators with cleaner, more efficient natural gas models.

AMHA also used a new financing authority granted by HUD called energy performance contracts to make more than \$12 million in capital improvements paid for by savings in energy costs over a 12-year period. Improvements included new LED lighting, exterior security lighting, boilers, hot water tanks, high-efficiency furnaces, programmable thermostats, and low-flow water-saving devices.

Between 2009 and 2014 AMHA will have spent an additional \$40 million for capital improvements. At all 11 of the high-rise apartment buildings, the construction department has reconfigured and renovated the first-floor offices and common areas. All of the apartments in four of these high-rises—Lauer, Saferstein I, Alpeter, and Dickson—have been fully renovated. To improve security throughout, 468 security cameras and more than 800 electronic access security locks were installed.

Williams worries about the continuing loss of funding, but she is proud of the department's recent work. The rehabilitation and redesign of many homes have improved the look of public housing, and, she believes, reduced the crime rate. Drug use has also dropped, and she asserts it is no more common than that in the suburbs. For Williams, the reward is helping people who otherwise might be living on the streets.¹⁷

Another major development was HUD's emphasis on asset management. When HUD required local housing authorities to convert to asset management principles, it changed its funding formula to encourage housing authorities to transition to the new system earlier than required. O'Leary knew early on of the proposed changes as a result of his board membership and participation with national housing groups. Thus, AMHA had already made some changes



Kitchen in one of the senior high-rise apartments

such as elimination of the central warehouse and implementation of JIT purchasing.¹⁸

The asset management model imposed complex changes that also shifted added responsibility to property managers. Despite the extensive training required, no additional staff or resources were funded by the federal government. Nonetheless, AMHA decided to bring in a human resources consultant to meet privately with managers in order to facilitate often difficult changes. AMHA also provided training through the Institute of Real Estate Management so that property managers could increase knowledge and sharpen skills. According to O’Leary, “We did a lot of coaching to build managers’ supervisory skills, enhance communication, and establish clear goals and accountability.”

Although HUD already recognized AMHA as a high-performing agency, O’Leary saw advantages and disadvantages to the highly prescriptive asset management model and overall thought it was based upon unrealistic expectations for property managers. AMHA already placed high value on the full occupancy and curb appeal of its properties, but now put greater emphasis upon helping field staff understand the cost of building operations and the value of consistency in following management practices and meeting performance goals. According to O’Leary, overall performance at the property level has improved in some ways. However, the pace of change and ever-increasing complexity of federal regulations still require active administration from executive-level staff with appropriate board consultation.¹⁹

Supportive Services

Pamela Hawkins, the deputy director of Resident Services and Community Development, believes that “AMHA is more than just housing.” Her goal is for the housing authority to provide services that help residents to be successful and make them feel like part of a supportive community. Part of those services work to assure that residents follow lease regulations, and that they know about housekeeping and general maintenance. But they also emphasize teaching people how to be more self-reliant and ultimately less dependent on public housing.

Nonetheless, as Hawkins points out, not everyone in public housing will achieve independence. Congress changed the law to allow applicants with disabilities regardless of age to qualify for senior housing. That change altered the demographics of public housing. The numbers increased so dramatically that those with disabilities now constitute 55 percent of the senior high-rise population, compared to 20 percent in the mid-1980s.²⁰

A property management work session. From left: Stephanie Sims, Debbie Bromley, Jackie Apati, Vanessa Brown, and Erika Saulsberry



“We did a lot of coaching to build managers’ supervisory skills, enhance communication, and establish clear goals and accountability.”

—Tony O’Leary

HOPE VI was an earlier example of the emphasis on service. Its Community Supportive Services Program provided funding that allowed social service providers and even businesses to offer assistance to residents. They aided residents with transportation needs, provided referrals for child care, gave instructions in computer usage, and offered opportunities for education and job training. In turn, residents were expected to obtain a job, or take advantage of education and training opportunities. Meanwhile, youth and their parents worked with the Community Support Services staff, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers, and Akron Public School teachers, who provided homework assistance and computer skill training. The University of Akron measured the outcomes, which showed better scholastic grades and increased school attendance.²¹

Outside funding has recently helped enhance these services. The Knight Foundation invests in communities where the Knight brothers owned newspapers, such as the *Akron Beacon Journal*. In 2011 the foundation awarded a three-year grant to Cascade Village and its managing company, The Community Builders, totaling \$1.7 million. According to spokesperson Paula Ellis, the foundation is committed “to help unlock all of the power that people have and involve them in creating their own solutions.” Hence, residents will play a part in the creation of workshops on career and financial planning, and in the establishment of school and youth programs. The Knight grant allowed Cascade Village to hire a youth and education counselor, as well as finance, job, and career coaches. Ellis emphasized that this approach was not charity, but an attempt to help people prosper through empowerment to create their own solutions. Resident Jeanie Wilson found this approach exciting. “I couldn’t help but think that my neighborhood would be like the one I grew up in—where everybody knew each other, and looked out for each other. You didn’t have to go outside for help.”²²

In 2005–06 Hawkins and the Resident Services department applied for and received a grant to purchase 10 wireless laptop computers and a minivan, and to fund the hiring of an instructor. The grant allowed the department to replace a decade-old mobile vehicle that was obsolete and energy inefficient. AMHA’s other service on wheels, a mobile health unit, was leased to the Akron Health Department for community health service.²³

Another more recent example of service to residents is the Summit Lake Family Opportunity Center that will open in 2014, next to the housing authority’s 241-unit Summit Lake Apartments. AMHA was one of only 10 housing authorities in the nation to obtain a HUD grant in 2011 to construct early-childhood, adult-learning, and job-training centers. The center will prepare area children for kindergarten, and help area adults obtain their GEDs and learn important job skills, such as use of computers. Former ward representative and council president Marco Sommerville praised the program for helping area children start kindergarten at the

Summit Lake Family Opportunity Center will open in 2014.



same level as children from wealthier families. “This is going to put them on footing where they can catch up and even do more than what they’re expected to do,” he noted. Partnership again plays a major role. The City of Akron is providing the land, Akron Public Schools will run two kindergarten classes, and Akron Summit Community Action is providing two Early Head Start and two Head Start classes for preschool children. Further assistance comes from the Akron-Summit County Public Library, Goodwill Industries, the Summit County Department of Job and Family Services, and Boys & Girls Clubs.²⁴

The emphasis on early childhood education as one of the strategies to address poverty was further enhanced by county executive Russell Pry when he announced that he was making early childhood a priority of his administration in 2009. He appointed community leaders to form Summit County’s First Things First (FTF), a comprehensive “system plan” for early childhood development and learning which includes areas of early childcare and education, health, behavioral health, family support, and special needs and early intervention. The plan strives to address gaps in the various systems and identify improvements that ensure the greatest opportunity for children. It also seeks to broaden existing efforts by expanding their scope or extending their focus. More than 50 people helped draft the plan which includes 14 desired outcomes.²⁵

Pamela Hawkins is very enthusiastic about focusing on early childhood as a means to help low-income children receive services that will promote kindergarten readiness. AMHA’s Early Childhood Initiative teaches parents to be their child’s first and most important teacher while promoting physical and behavioral health and providing supportive services to families. The initiative served 419 children and 398 parents in the fiscal year 2013. The State of Ohio’s Kindergarten Readiness Assessment for Literacy will be used to evaluate the program’s effectiveness, but because the participants are just now reaching kindergarten age, more time is needed to obtain verifiable long-term results. The nearby Woodridge Local School District operates state-supported public preschools at Honey Locust and Maplewood Gardens.²⁶

Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have become a focus of the need for housing assistance over the past decade. Adjustment to life beyond the military has been problematic for many generations of veterans. Some develop issues related to physical and mental health, including addictions. Thus, veterans become homeless at a higher rate than non-veterans. In 2008 HUD secretary Shaun Donovan announced that homeless veterans in contact with a Veterans



AMHA's nationally acclaimed early childhood initiative promotes kindergarten readiness.

Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) could receive rental assistance vouchers from the local housing authority. In 2010 Akron was one of five Ohio cities that each received 25 Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers. Veterans must follow the rules of the voucher program, and contribute 30 percent of their income to the rent. Veterans Affairs caseworkers assist VASH voucher holders in finding and maintaining housing, and the local VAMC provides medical care. AMHA has acquired 60 of these vouchers, but due to underfunding of administrative fees for the Housing Choice Voucher Program, the agency cannot afford to expand the VASH program.²⁷

One VASH participant, an Air Force veteran nearing age 50 who became homeless in 2000 and lived in a tent for the next 10 years, came to the attention of street outreach workers. This veteran was eligible for an AMHA voucher, which he used to move into an apartment in southwest Akron. “I feel like a human being again,” he said, and since enrolling in the program in 2009, he has maintained the apartment with ongoing support from HUD-VASH case managers.²⁸

Presently under development is a 60-unit property, The Commons at Madaline Park. Developed and owned by Testa Enterprises and Community Support Services, it will serve not only veterans, but also the chronically homeless and those with chronic mental illness. The property, designed as permanent supportive housing, will include a range of services to foster housing stability.

Goal of Self-Sufficiency

AMHA has long emphasized the goals of self-sufficiency and economic improvement. Although single women with two or more children constitute the bulk of AMHA residents, they are required by the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 to secure a job or take part in an education or training program. To aid them in this effort, AMHA relies on Project Learn, funded through HUD and by the state, among other community partners. Staff help residents acquire GEDs and develop computer literacy.²⁹

As Presidents Clinton and Bush touted the idea that more Americans should own homes, thereby enhancing neighborhood stability and resident responsibility, AMHA, with HUD encouragement, developed its own Home For Me plan that resulted in an agreement whereby AMHA could deposit a portion of the voucher holder’s monthly federal assistance as a mortgage payment. The voucher holder was required to complete training in homeownership and work to repair credit where necessary. AMHA officially adopted the program in 2007 and has since helped 37 families to move to homeownership.

O’Leary is not optimistic about the number of AMHA residents who eventually will own their own homes. Given an economy with many jobs paying poverty-level wages, most residents could not afford the mortgage payments and ongoing maintenance costs. Instead he believes that the goal of self-sufficiency will have a more positive effect on most residents. Thus, AMHA uses federal funds through the Family Self-Sufficiency program to work with individuals and

An Air Force veteran was eligible for an AMHA voucher, which he used to move into an apartment in southwest Akron. “I feel like a human being again,” he said.

families. Case managers carefully supervise their movement toward self-sufficiency, as participants set and work toward goals such as furthering education or training. Insufficient progress may lead to loss of funds accumulated by a participant in this program.

Desegregation

One of the major problems housing authorities have faced over the decades is racial segregation. Many whites chose to move to the suburbs as the African-American population began to rise. Racial covenants in many suburban communities restricted blacks' access to better housing, and thus many African Americans remained in cities like Akron. The first housing projects, such as Elizabeth Park, were rarely mixed.

After World War II the civil rights movement successfully challenged restrictive covenants in the courts and sought corrective congressional legislation regarding jobs and housing. The movement accused public housing officials of failing to integrate housing developments because they shared society's biases against minorities.

Although racial steering did occur in the early years of public housing, especially on the federal level, by the late 1950s HUD required housing authorities to develop new policies that would foster greater integration of the public housing properties. But they were stymied by the fact that bias was not the only cause affecting the racial distribution. It was quickly apparent that a housing authority could not achieve integration by controlling where people live. It had no power to force anyone to accept a lease since people were free to choose their place of residence. Given a choice, some African-American families did not view integration into white society as a priority when confronted by issues like the lack of transportation or the availability of a job. Some wanted the security of their own community and access to their own religious and social institutions.

And, of course, whites could also make choices to avoid forced integration. In 1959 HUD had ordered AMHA to integrate the all-white Edgewood Homes. As soon as blacks moved in, whites began to move out. Within nine years Edgewood had become 85 percent black. Thereafter, HUD decided to emphasize the fairness of the procedure rather than a statistically desirable mixture. In 1978 HUD required that each applicant come to the central office, fill out a form, proceed through an evaluation of eligibility for federal housing aid, and then be apprised of three possible openings on a first-come, first-served basis. Each of the three would be based on its availability rather than its location. This system also failed to promote integration because applicants could refuse any assignment. AMHA thus decided to provide only one opportunity per person: if the applicants refused an offer, they would be placed at the bottom of the list, which would keep them out of public housing for five or six years. That system has not worked either, but it is not possible to force integration constitutionally.³⁰

Vouchers, which have grown from 3,600 in the early 1990s to

“Once we’ve made all these changes, once we’ve done everything possible to make it more efficient, we’re still left with the question of how to keep going.”

—Tony O’Leary

more than 5,000 today, have encouraged more integration, particularly in the suburbs. However, most of the voucher residents still live in the city of Akron. HUD continues to encourage housing authorities to seek to move low-income clients to higher-income neighborhoods, but provides no funding to offset the additional costs.³¹

Success

Throughout this difficult period AMHA has performed well. HUD has rated it as one of the nation's most effective authorities. Over the past decade AMHA has maintained "high performer" status—the top federal ranking—for its management of the public housing and voucher programs. During that time the occupancy rate rose from 97 to 99 percent and voucher use increased from 96 to 100 percent. In 2001 the housing authority's Housing Choice Voucher Program had ranked as "troubled," but staff led by Sherri Scheetz helped it to achieve a "high performer" designation by 2004. Presentations at national housing meetings often focused on the quality of AMHA programs and services. In addition, AMHA was the nation's first large housing authority to pass review for conversion to HUD's new asset management requirements in 2007.

And there are other indicators of quality. The National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials presented a national merit award to AMHA for its collaborative approach to homeless outreach. The two HOPE VI projects received architectural awards that were featured in national publications. AMHA's establishment of a disaster recovery site so impressed the Housing Authority Insurance Group that it bestowed a best practices award. Joy Park Homes, Van Buren Homes, and Edgewood Village received Gold Key Awards from the Northeast Ohio Apartment Association for physical appearance of the property, services and amenities, staff knowledge, and general business performance. Finally, AMHA has consistently passed federal and state audits, an indication of its sound and stable condition.

Also of note are AMHA contributions to the local economy. Each year the housing authority invests more than \$80 million in Greater Akron. The HOPE VI programs have pumped an additional \$90 million into their neighborhoods.³²

Ken Merrifield (left) and Bill Lewellyn of the Housing Authority Insurance Group presented executive director Anthony O'Leary with a national award for excellence.



The Future

But Sherri Scheetz and her boss, Tony O'Leary, share grave concerns because AMHA's federal support dropped from \$17,694,995 in 2012 to \$15,209,761 in 2013, a 14 percent cut. "We're operating this agency as close to a business model as possible," O'Leary says. But that efficiency is not being rewarded, as funding has either diminished or been held up because of congressional failure to settle

budget disputes. “Once we’ve made all these changes, once we’ve done everything possible to make it more efficient, we’re still left with the question of how to keep going.”

Board members are concerned about the impact on staffing, whether by cutting or by retirement. John Fickes worries that staff cuts will lead to diminished ability to do the paperwork required by HUD, which would lead to further budget cuts. Elisabeth Akers fears a diminished ability to meet the high standards of operation she has observed at AMHA. And then there are the potential retirements of the management staff, including that of Tony O’Leary.

Like a number of the AMHA staff, Leonard Foster, a trustee since 1993, lived in public housing as a child—in the city’s first site, Elizabeth Park. “When I was coming up, we called it the Brick City, but it was home, it really was,” he said. “Everyone I knew lived in the projects, so we had a common bond. There will always be housing for low-income people. Public housing may not be public in the way we think of it today, but AMHA will still be able to provide housing to folks who need it. My take is, if our funding dried up tomorrow, we might suffer, but we would survive.”

For the present, the mission of providing housing for the low-income family remains O’Leary’s major focus, but he finds very little mention of public housing by political candidates during elections. “Will there be enough resources to continue public housing?” he asks. “We’re on the precipice of having our entire [housing stock] inventory becoming obsolete without major reinvestment. Will the need for major building projects be recognized? Is there really a commitment to housing the poor in this country?”

Despite these conditions, O’Leary remains an optimistic person. Within the many constraints affecting housing authorities, he has built a well-oiled and successful operation. The staff is strong, and agrees with the O’Leary philosophy of doing the best that you can with the resources available. “We want to help whoever comes after us to continue the success we’ve had,” he concludes. “How we address the need for affordable housing will continue to be a compelling issue on the public agenda for years to come.” ■

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Past Trustees and Executive Directors

Since its founding 75 years ago, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority has been fortunate to have a dedicated and accomplished board of volunteer trustees. Past trustees and executive directors are listed here.

Board Chairmen

Paul Belcher, 1938–1982
William Fowler, February 1982–July 1982
Warren Gibson, July 1982–October 1983
John Blickle, October 1983–December 1985
Vincent Lobello, December 1985–January 1988
Edward Davis, January 1988–January 1990
David Lieberth, January 1990–May 1990
Kim Hoover, May 1990–July 1990
Louise Gissendaner, July 1990–June 1993
Ray Kapper, January 1994–January 1998
Kurt Laubinger, January 1998–January 2003

Executive Directors

Martin Lauer, 1938–1961
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Herbert Newman, 1973–1978
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Janet Purnell, 1982–1988
Paul Messenger, 1988–1992

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2013 Executive Director and Board of Trustees



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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 1993–PRESENT



JOHN FICKES
BOARD MEMBER, 1998–2002
BOARD CHAIRMAN, 2003–PRESENT



LEONARD FOSTER
BOARD MEMBER, 1993–PRESENT
BOARD VICE-CHAIRMAN,
1998–2002, 2009–PRESENT



THOMAS HARNDEN
BOARD MEMBER, 2005–PRESENT



ELISABETH AKERS
BOARD MEMBER, 2012–PRESENT

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Ray Kapper, September 1999
Kurt Laubinger, August and October 1999
Miriam Spiggle Lauer, November 1988
David Levey, November 1988
Terry Meese, November 1988, September 1999
Paul Messenger, May 1990
Herbert Newman, November 1988
Anthony O'Leary, August and September 1999, September 2013
Janet Purnell, December 1988
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