



HOUSING PRESERVATION NEWS

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“Why Preserve Existing Affordable Rental Housing? One Tenant’s Story (and a Call for More)”

Those of you who work with local governments, developers, lenders, investors and community members (which should be just about everyone reading this) know that this unspoken question lies behind the choices being made to allow the demolition or conversion of subsidized rental housing and our government’s failure to invest more resources in preserving this critical resource. Here are a few reasons we typically give in response to the question “why preserve existing affordable rental housing?”:

- It generally costs half as much and takes half the time vs. building it new.
- On average it serves much lower income households than building new.
- New construction alone won’t produce enough affordable housing to meet demand in most markets nationally.

But these reasons, compelling as they may seem to us, are mostly about facts and figures and a growing body of research shows that this is not the best way of persuading the voters or the powers that be. What works better? Stories about real people. Stories with underlying values that we understand intuitively without thinking, stories that illustrate the power of preserving affordable housing through its impact on real people’s lives.

Here’s an example of one story told from the perspective of the impact on one family living in an existing HUD subsidized apartment complex in Lancaster, California:

Six years ago Karen Sulpi and her children were living in a 30-year old section 236 property in Lancaster called Beechwood Manor. Beechwood had significant deferred maintenance and rent restrictions that were about to expire. The property also had a long history of criminal activity and was known locally as “crack alley” reinforcing the worst stereotypes about low-income housing. Yet despite her fears for her own safety and that of her children, Karen lived at Beechwood because it was the only affordable home she could find. With assistance from the California Housing Partnership and many other partners, Long Beach-based nonprofit affordable housing developer LINC Housing purchased the property in 2002 and carried out a major renovation that included adding a community building and learning center, and extending the affordability for an additional 55 years. Equally important to the physical improvements was LINC’s focus on getting residents and visitors to act responsibly, which it did by enforcing reasonable rules and regulations consistently, making Beechwood a safe community where its residents can thrive. This year LINC added an after-school program for the many children on-site and Karen was hired as a teacher, providing her with a more dependable income and the opportunity to work close to home in a field she loves. Without LINC’s timely intervention it is likely that Beechwood would have converted to market rents and Karen and many others like her would never have had the chance to live in the healthy, safe community that LINC was able to create, and to obtain a decent job close to home so it did not require a long commute that would have taken away from her time with her children.

Karen Sulpi’s success story was made possible by LINC’s work in transforming Beechwood into a sustainable and healthy community. This is the kind of success story we need to tell to illustrate the benefits of preserving and revitalizing existing affordable rental housing. If you are a nonprofit developer with a similar story that highlights the good work being done to preserve affordable housing throughout California, please Email Elyse at eperry.chpc.net. Stories should focus on the impact on a single family and include details of the overall transformation of the property.

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