

Housing Initiative Clinic Briefs

Vacant CHA Properties

By Maia Lamdany, '16

May 2015

This Housing Initiative Clinic Brief reviews the Chicago Housing Authority's vacant properties.

Overview

As of September 30, 2013, 3219 (15.2%) of the Chicago Housing Authority's 21,189 units were vacant and/or offline. Of those, 333 were vacant and available for occupancy and 2886 (13.6% of the total properties) were offline. Of the offline units, 2101 (72.8%) were pending redevelopment/planning.

The Chicago Housing Authority is emphasizing the development of mixed-income housing in its current redevelopment efforts. For instance, according to the Lathrop master plan, the Lathrop redevelopment will be comprised of 1,208 units: 504 market-rate, 212 affordable-rate, 400 dedicated to public housing residents and 92 existing senior housing units which will remain untouched.

At the same time, the CHA has a significant deficit of properties for low-income Chicagoans. The CHA opened up its waitlist lottery in October of 2014, and more than 282,000 people had registered for it by the time it closed on November 24, 2014. The waitlist lottery was for spots on three different waitlists: Family Public Housing, Housing Choice Voucher program, and the Property Rental Assistance program. Of the more than 282,000 people who registered for the lottery, around 15,900 reported being homeless or living in a shelter or transitional housing.

The CHA's offline units would certainly be insufficient to provide housing for the approximately 15,900 people who signed up for the CHA lottery and reported being homeless or in temporary housing, much less for the full number of people who signed up for the waitlist

lottery. However, the CHA collects the same subsidy from the Department of Housing and Urban Development for the offline units as for the online/leasable units.

Complications with the CHA's Plans

CHA-owned properties such as most units in Lathrop Homes and the Francis Cabrini Rowhouses are offline because the CHA has been planning to start construction. However, they have been offline for years while the construction has stalled. The residents of the rowhouses agreed to vacate in 2008 so that the CHA could rebuild the rowhouses. The CHA revealed in 2011 that the rowhouses would become mixed-income housing. This would necessarily mean that many of the residents who agreed to leave in 2008 would not be able to return to their homes after the conclusion of the construction, and LAF initiated a lawsuit against the CHA on their behalf in 2013.

Legal Issues

Interested parties have also raised questions about the legality of the CHA's actions. The CHA is supposed to obtain permission from HUD before taking units offline, and the CHA does not appear to have done so. Moreover, irrespective of the legality, at least some of the units are inhabitable. The Cabrini Rowhouses passed federal inspection in 2011, and with so many low-income Chicagoans eager for public housing opportunities, the CHA could put people in at least some of the offline units. This could be an interim solution until the CHA is genuinely ready to begin large-scale construction.

Recommendations

The CHA is currently prioritizing future goals over present needs. While the CHA's long-term goals of economically integrated neighborhoods are certainly laudable, they are prioritizing these objectives over concrete solutions for present problems. Since some of the CHA's vacant

units are currently inhabitable, it would be a good public relations and principled move to allow people to move (back) in until renovations start in earnest. While the CHA may well fear that doing so would cause further delays to the commencement of the renovations, leaving the units vacant until construction begins at an as yet unknown time means that the CHA is closing its doors on people in desperate need of housing. The Housing Initiative is committed to promoting and improving housing policy in the state of Illinois to benefit low- and moderate-income families. With respect to the CHA's vacant properties, the Housing Initiative supports: The CHA focusing on the immediate needs of Chicagoans in addition to its long-term plans and reopening its habitable vacant units.

Further Reading

<http://chicagoreporter.com/home-evasion/>

<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/public-housing-authority-lathrop-homes-community-partners/Content?oid=13902268>

<http://chicago.curbed.com/archives/2014/08/12/lathrop-homes-1.php>

http://archpaper.com/news/articles.asp?id=7481#.VNEf_CjFI3R

<http://www.chicagohousinginitiative.org/public-housing-preservation/>

<http://www.thecha.org/cha-waitlist-lottery-officially-closes-as-more-than-282000-households-register-for-affordable-housing/>