



THINKING HOLISTICALLY

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Woonsocket Neighborhood Development Corporation

On one level, this is about a new idea in affordable housing—rental units specially designed for in-home day care so that low-income providers may get licensed to work at home and low-income neighbors may have safe child care while they are at work.

On another level, it is about how four particular day-care units built by the Woonsocket Neighborhood Development Corporation in Rhode Island exemplify the power of holistic thinking in rescuing a city from decline. There is still work to be done, but with holistic thinking and critical financial assistance—from Local Initiatives Support Corporation, low-income tax credits, NeighborWorks America, Rhode Island Housing, the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Rhode Island Housing Commission, and oth-

ers—a remarkable transformation has begun. It didn't happen overnight.

"In the early 1990s," WNDC executive director Joe Garlick recalls, "this Blackstone River town suffered numerous hits. The departure of mill business, the recession, and a major Rhode Island credit union bust had a cascading effect. Massive housing abandonment was the result, and institutions like the FDIC were stuck with unwanted properties."

Around this time, Woonsocket Neighborhood Development Corporation, which had been working since 1988 to create affordable housing for families all around Woonsocket, started to focus on Constitution Hill. In this once pleasant neighborhood, absentee ownership, boarded-up buildings, crime, drugs, and prostitution were making life for the remaining residents a struggle. Garlick

believes that property owners "had pretty much given up on the neighborhood."

Fortunately, two-thirds of the board of WNDC lived in and around the area and still cared. They remembered better days and longed to restore the neighborhood, impossible as that seemed.

Stan Eason, now 39 and a WNDC construction supervisor, recalls the neighborly Constitution Hill of his childhood. He also remembers that when things turned bad, the community heard many empty promises about improvements. "All we ever got were trees," Eason says.

So when WNDC turned its attention to Constitution Hill revitalization in 1994, he understood why the remaining neighbors were skeptical that it would ever improve. Nevertheless, Eason and a few others decided to give WNDC a chance.

“Even an old car that hasn’t been maintained can come back if you give it some oil and start to take care of it,” he told people. “You need to be a voice for your neighborhood. Even if things are beyond your control, you need to get on the phone and call.”

Joe Garlick believes that the decision of the Woonsocket police to open a sub-station for Constitution Hill was “a timely piece that helped” but that having people who cared about the neighborhood was the most critical element in the eventual turnaround.

Through grants and loans, WNDC began to buy unwanted neighborhood property and keep a close eye on it. Until the group had the funds and permits to start renovating, it made sure that buildings were securely boarded to discourage crime. “We cut the grass, we put strategic lights in, and once we started construction, there were no longer any places to hide.”

The Child-Care Units

The idea for child-care units didn’t surface until 2002, during the third phase of the affordable-housing development on Constitution Hill. It grew out of a series of community meetings held as part of a neighborhood-revitalization

Financial Fitness Classes

All WNDC tenants are supposed to attend a financial fitness class. In addition, if they think they may want to buy a home, they may take a \$35 eight-week home-buyer education class, which provides certification for two years. The class helps first-time home buyers learn about such matters as saving, budgets, and getting their credit in order so they can get a mortgage. With the certification, they can get help with a down payment and closing costs.

planning effort that was funded by Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation.

One of the meetings was with Connecting for Children and Families, Inc. (CCF), and with members of CCF’s home child-care support network. Through the network, set up to improve and sustain the supply of affordable child-care slots in Woonsocket, CCF provided ongoing training and technical assistance to providers.

The initial focus of the 2002 meeting was to solicit ideas and suggestions on projects that would improve targeted neighborhoods. As the meeting drew to a close, the conversation turned to the difficulty of starting a home child-care business if the provider was a renter. Landlords were not interested in having more children around or in making the

modifications needed for securing a license from the R.I. Department of Children, Youth, and Families. Play yards, extra exits, smoke detectors, and the like were unwanted expenses.

At this point in the meeting, WNDC came up with some holistic and creative thinking about addressing the child-care need in its current affordable-housing project.

With help from HUD’s Low Income Housing Tax-Credit (LIHTC) program, WNDC was well into the planning phase of a 19-unit project that was part of its ten-year Constitution Hill initiative. Once this third phase was complete, 109 apartments in 33 buildings would be substantially rehabilitated and no abandoned houses would remain. With the neighborhood safe, what better time to incorporate apartments for in-home child-care providers?

Several questions needed to be answered first:

- What additional building-code and state-licensing requirements would the child-care units be required to meet;
- Were there any restrictions in the LIHTC program that would prohibit incorporating the provider units in the project; and
- Were there any prohibitions under the Federal Fair Housing Act or the Americans with Disabilities Act?

Local Initiatives Support Corporation (a national organization whose Rhode Island office has over time invested close to \$20 million in WNDC through loans and grants) provided \$7,000 to research the issues. WNDC’s architect, John O’Hearne of O’Hearne Associates in North Smithfield, Rhode Island, did the necessary code research, and Kristin DeKuiper and Christopher



Brenda Flores, home child-care provider, with Kiara T. “WNDC gives you an opportunity to progress,” Flores says.



Stan Eason, WNDC construction supervisor, says, "People's spirit has been rekindled."

B. Hanback of Holland & Knight, LLC, addressed other legal and regulatory issues. The research showed that the idea could work.

Getting Legal Advice

When Garlick questioned WNDC's attorneys in July 2002, a set-aside for in-home child-care units, as far as he knew, had never been attempted in an affordable-housing project. In a letter, he described the plan for phase three on Constitution Hill, which called for senior housing, child-care, and other units.

Units for in-home child care would have a finished basement that included a sink, a half bath, and cabinets. The letter explained that although none of the finished basements were handicapped accessible and none of the phase-three units for families were handicapped accessible, two of the senior-citizen units were. Since Rhode Island Housing required that, overall, 5 percent of units in a project be handicapped accessible and two out of the 19 in phase three qualified, he believed that the plan exceeded the regulations.

Continuing to look at the initiative holistically, Garlick emphasized the need for child care in Woonsocket: "The latest RI KidsCount analysis estimates that there is a shortage of 800 slots in the city. Renters hoping to start a licensed home child-care business are at a great disad-

vantage. This is unfortunate since, in addition to alleviating a community shortage of licensed slots, it is also a good way for very low-income women to supplement their income. Licensed providers are also eligible to receive state health-care coverage."

Hanback's detailed response included some reassuring language: "Both the

IRS and the Treasury Department have taken the position that low-income housing projects may give preference to certain classes of tenants as long as those preferences do not violate HUD nondiscrimination policies. . . . We can think of no valid reason that setting aside units for tenants who desire to operate home day-care businesses would violate HUD's nondiscrimination policies or the federal Fair Housing Act."

And ultimately, because the Americans with Disabilities Act is less stringent about renovated buildings than about new construction, the main modifications were additional exits, smoke detectors, and bathrooms. Their cost amounted to \$15,000 to \$20,000 per unit. The Rhode Island Housing Resources Commission, through its Building Better Communities program, and the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation (now called NeighborWorks America) provided the funding to complete the child-care units as a part of the 19-unit project.

Today four home child-care businesses are flourishing on Constitution Hill.



Woonsocket Neighborhood Development Corporation's director of community building and organizing, Margaux Morisseau, left, with Liz Burch, family home provider consultant for Connecting for Children and Families.

Mill Town on the Upswing

Margaux Morisseau is the director of community building and organizing for the Woonsocket Neighborhood Development Corporation. There is nothing she would rather talk about than the improvements in Woonsocket since WNDC and other neighborhood groups began collaborating 17 years ago. The granddaughter of French Canadian mill workers who tell stories of dyes turning the Blackstone River different colors every day, she is as excited as they are about the cleaner water and the plans for the abandoned mills.

Her tour of Woonsocket, which may include taking reporters to a Constitution Hill child-care unit or two, is comprehensive. One of the neighborhood highlights is the Child Care Center belonging to Connecting for Children and Families. Morisseau and Liz Burch, family home provider consultant for CCF, like to reminisce about the building's former life as the worst bar in Woonsocket.

"The people in the neighborhood," says Morisseau, "knew that nothing would improve until the bar was gone. Joe Garlick negotiated for the building with the bartender—passing a paper plate back and forth over the counter until they had a deal!"

On her way to the Community Art Center, Morisseau points out the white picket fences of the 100-year-old and older mill-worker houses that WNDC renovated on Constitution Hill. Nearby is a house where the owner-residents "caught the sprucing-up bug" after seeing the neighborhood improve. A yellow house has the distinction of renovation help from Bob Vila, host of the television show "This Old House." The broad parking space behind the homes, says Morisseau as she drives by the community garden and playground, tends to generate neighborly cookouts.

At the Community Art Center, performance artist Michaele Saintil, a member of the Providence Black Repertory Theater, is the latest artist-in-residence.

She gets free rent for a three-bedroom unit with a yard and deck. In exchange, she provides 12 hours a week of after-school classes to Woonsocket students from first grade through twelfth, keeping them busy with poetry, the spoken word, acting, photography, and writing. The center has a full kitchen, with food provided by the local food bank.

Morisseau says that WNDC, having successfully tested the teacher-in-residence model for six years, intends to renovate a boarded-up mill to create a learning center with apartments for six new teachers. Like the artist-in-residence, the teachers will pay utilities but no rent. They will have a one-year contract, renewable each year for three years.

Morisseau gives Garlick much credit for the creative approach that has involved WNDC in both big innovations like the child-care units and small ones like using origami to teach young children fractions ("first you fold the paper in half; then you fold it in quarters"). But in the end, she adds, the secret of success is "the people themselves" . . . the people and nonprofits of Woonsocket collaborating to solve problems and build economic sustainability in an old Rhode Island mill town.



The exterior decoration of the Community Art Center was created by neighborhood children and an artist-in-residence.