

## RESPONDING TO ASSUMPTIONS on PUBLIC HOUSING IN CHICAGO

Too often, honest and useful public discussion of the current crisis in public housing is made more difficult by inaccurate commonplace assumptions about people living in public housing and about the buildings themselves. Many of these commonplace assumptions are not true, but, because they have been reinforced consistently by the CHA and by the mainstream media, they are increasingly being used to justify both the demolition of buildings that could be rehabbed and the displacement of residents before adequate replacement housing is available for them.

Here, we provide you with a list of some of the most common assumptions about public housing, and the reality of the situation, from our point of view:

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ASSUMPTION #1: "Public housing is a handout; it creates dependency. People should own their own homes."

**Public housing has always existed in some form in developed societies when governments and citizens recognize that, for various reasons, some people are not in a position to either buy their own homes or rent at the standard market rate. Although historically most people in public housing have lived there temporarily, several factors have combined in recent years to make it much harder for people to make this transition, ESPECIALLY IN CHICAGO. First, there are not enough living wage jobs available to provide adequate income for all citizens to be financially independent; second, the "free market" housing market has not provided enough affordable housing for low-income people. Housing is increasingly priced to attract upper-middle class buyers; there is not enough rental housing currently available for middle-class renters, let alone people with lower income levels. Public housing therefore doesn't make residents "dependent"; it provides them with housing they can afford that is not otherwise available. It is also worth noting that middle- and upper-class housing is consistently subsidized by tax breaks and other "incentives," and that the little public money now being used to subsidize low-income housing will be further reduced by proposed cuts in the HUD budget.**

ASSUMPTION # 2: "The private market can provide more, and better, housing for low-income families and individuals."

**Certainly, the private market COULD provide more, but we have all seen that it doesn't, and isn't likely to as long as it can reap more**

**profit from "luxury condos" and other such development aimed at higher-income buyers. Since the federal government has voted to abandon much public housing to local and often private housing authorities, it is imperative that currently available public housing be maintained and made available to people who are priced out of the private market. The only thing guaranteed by reliance on private markets is that private companies will make a profit.**

ASSUMPTION # 3: "High rises and concentrated housing don't work--they're not good for families. Scattered sites are better."

**Hundreds of thousands of families live in high-rises along the "Gold Coast" and do just fine; all of the children involved in public school shootings in the last two years lived in single-family homes, some of them quite luxurious. As even a casual look around the city will confirm, there are literally hundreds of high-rise warehouses that are being converted into condos intended for middle-class families. It's not the housing design itself, but the extent to which the buildings, whether low-rise or high-rise, are maintained and kept in safe and livable condition that's the problem. While the present high-rises may not be ideal, they are better than nothing, or a subsidized apartment far from jobs, schools, and transportation.**

**Recent studies have shown what residents have long known--that the displacement of residents to scattered site units often has the effect of disrupting, rather than strengthening, family and community networks. Scattered site units are often far from the residents' old neighborhood where they may have worked, gone to school and church, and had solidly established networks of neighbors who shared childcare and shopping and watched out for each other. Residents who've been relocated to scattered site housing are often isolated in poor-quality housing in unwelcoming surroundings.**

ASSUMPTION # 4: "If the buildings are deteriorating, it's because the residents ruined them, so why should CHA try to repair them?"

**CHA has not only allowed, but often encouraged buildings to deteriorate by not responding to tenant work-order requests for repairs of plumbing, heating, windows, lighting, etc. If basic repairs are not made promptly, they can cause extensive damage. There is ample documentation that CHA has strategically allowed units and then entire buildings to deteriorate to the point that they can be**

**declared "unlivable." The experience of Lawndale residents, who were forced to go without basic services like hot water as the CHA rushed to empty the buildings, is the most recent example of this strategy.**

ASSUMPTION # 5: "The land can be put to better use for something else more profitable."

**If there are 42,000 CHA residents being displaced, and more than 50,000 on waiting lists for public housing units because they can't afford market rate housing, what better use could this land be put to? Repairing already standing buildings and units will be far less expensive than building new housing on other sites. In addition to this financial cost, there is the potential social cost of leaving nearly 100,000 homeless or inadequately housed, which must be weighed against the supposed profit benefit of adding even more high-priced housing to Chicago's already top-heavy market.**

ASSUMPTION #6: "Why should residents have a say in what happens to their buildings--they don't own their units?"

**If the basic rights of citizenship are going to be available to people only on the basis of property ownership, then the Constitution will have to be re-written to acknowledge that the country is returning to 18th-century criteria for citizenship rights. And since many people, in public housing or not, are prevented from owning their own homes because of 1) exorbitant market rates and 2) the lack of enough living-wage jobs (see #1 above), this argument makes no sense. CHA residents have long demanded a voice in deciding what will happen to them and their homes; the CHA's latest plan was once again drawn up without resident input.**

ASSUMPTION #7: "People in public housing are being relocated and/or displaced because of 'poor lifestyle choices'--they need CHA supervision, 'training,'etc. before they can be allowed to make their own decisions."

**This argument, which treats Chicagoans in public housing as if they were bad children rather than people who have managed to get by and raise children in circumstances most middle-class people can't imagine, is rooted not in "behaviors" so much as in RACE and**

**CLASS hierarchies--quite simply, middle-class suburbanites who now want to move back into the city want access to the land under public housing to create communities that are not meant to be either mixed income or mixed race. Again, there are many studies showing both that the motivation for displacing public housing residents is the potential private value of the land on which that housing stands, and that the justification strategy for this displacement is that "those people" don't know how to parent, don't want to work, etc.**

**Again, what is conveniently ignored by this argument is that there are simply not enough living-wage jobs, or enough available low-income housing, for the people in Chicago who need it. Until these are available, there should be a MORATORIUM on further displacement and demolition until there is enough safe, affordable, accessible low-income housing available to prevent the disruption of communities and the probability of further homelessness.**