

Op-Ed

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The White Marsh Pointe at Eagle Landing (WMPEL) housing development represents the culmination of a decades long effort by the Suffolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority (SRHA) to improve the lives of low-income residents. Not only do the residents get newly updated and rehabilitated units in addition to the newly constructed apartments, but the community benefits tremendously as the housing will integrate with the overall community that is growing and evolving. For those familiar with the history of public housing in Suffolk, the names Parker Riddick and Cypress Manor represented Suffolk's first entry into public housing in the 1970's. As we transition to new funding formulas and models, we focus on our motto of "changing housing, changing minds and changing lives." We cannot do that without reflecting on the original thinking behind public housing as temporary solutions for housing needs for the disadvantaged. In time, public housing has been more permanent and generational in some cases. We kept this history in mind as we planned the transition and upgrades to the housing stock that would be offered to residents who find themselves with need of temporary affordable income housing and for those for who still face challenges with transitioning to the next continuum of housing. We understand that rehabilitation of physical structures and sometimes demolishing and rebuilding are part of the cycle of growth and planning for the future.

The need for affordable, quality housing options will always be with us. We approached this project committed to the understanding that our residents deserve a decent and safe place to live. Children who grow up in public housing need safe places to play and access to WIFI to complete their educational studies. Residents of all ages need to feel they are part of the community and that they, and their lives, matter. They too need access to technology that can improve their employability. We do know that low-income housing does not define the trajectory of a life as many residents have gone on to excel in many areas and reflect on their time in public housing as a start, a temporary band aid, and as their first exposure to a place called home.

I cannot help but feel after decades of working in public housing that positive change is underway. From the earliest community advocates for housing options for lower income residents to those who currently serve and advocate for safe, quality housing, the goals are the same. When many, such as Commissioners George Y. Birdsong (SRHA's first chairman), Richard Harrell, G. S. Hobbs, the past Executive Director, Clarissa McAdoo-Cannon, and too many to name here, established the footing for the SRHA, they understood and were committed to meeting the needs of the community. They knew housing could change lives. Early advocates like Moses A. Riddick, Jr., Locke Parker, and Rev D. Lawrence Williams understood this as well. As we continue planning and designing the community features and amenities, we will keep in mind how this history and the contributions of those who have paved the way can be incorporated into the design. We shall build upon their work and commitment.

My first job at SRHA was in human resources. I cared about people and how to make their lives better on the job. In time, I saw how my work touched the lives of the residents who approached our offices as their last resort for putting a roof over their heads. We needed to hire people who

understood that. They also needed to understand that the repair and maintenance of the residential units was of utmost importance. We also needed to provide residential services to meet the many needs of those in our community. We needed to assist with job training, education, connection to services, and the recreational needs of children. As Executive Director, I still see the work as being in the human resource business with a much broader focus. We focus on the human need of the residents to have quality, safe, affordable housing.

The WMPEL project will make a difference in the lives of the people we serve. The changes underway reflect a community that cares, advocates, and provides upgrades and rehabilitation for that most basic human need: a roof over our heads.