

# The Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses of Resident-Managed Public Housing Sites in the United States

DANIEL J. MONTI\*  
*University of Missouri-St. Louis*

**ABSTRACT:** *The federal government has initiated an effort to encourage public housing residents to manage and own their developments. Notwithstanding the public attention resident management has received, there has been little research dealing with this subject. Reviewed in this article are the experiences of 11 developments that have resident management or whose residents would like to have it. Four major findings are discussed: (1) good housing authority and tenant relations do not necessarily produce effective resident management corporations (RMCs); (2) a few strong resident leaders do not produce effective RMCs; (3) sites with good ties to outside institutions are likely to fare better; and (4) sites with good community organizations tend to have more effective RMCs.*

The "Housing and Community Development Act of 1987" makes it much easier and more financially attractive for public housing residents to manage and eventually purchase the developments in which they live. There are monies set aside to facilitate these changes, including funds for technical assistance. A number of tenant leaders and their supporters worked long and hard to have this legislation passed. What remains to be seen is just how effectively public housing residents can use the new legislation. In this article, we will review some key organizational problems with which existing or would-be resident management sites must deal.

## WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT RESIDENT MANAGEMENT

Not much is known about resident-managed public housing sites. The subject has generated little academic interest, despite the public attention it has received (Meehan, 1979; Hexter, 1986). Proponents of resident management have published reports on the subject,

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*\*Direct all correspondence to: Daniel J. Monti, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO 63121.*

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but these are not especially thorough (National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, 1984; Metropolitan Planning Council, 1986). Public housing authorities rarely publish information on the subject.<sup>1</sup> What little we do know comes from two reports. Summarized in the first are the findings of the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), which carried out and evaluated a demonstration project on resident management in seven sites during the 1970s (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981). Its work was sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Ford Foundation. The second and much less ambitious report was prepared for the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO) in 1983. In general, it constituted a follow-up study of four sites in the MDRC project (Kolodny, 1983).

Seven sites in six cities were selected for the original demonstration project. These were drawn from a pool of sites recommended for inclusion on the basis of three criteria: (1) housing authority commitment to resident management; (2) tenants' organizational and managerial potential; and (3) cooperation between the housing authority and tenants. The selection of individual sites followed "extensive field visits" and discussions with local and federal officials. MDRC staff also included a variety of low- and high-rise sites in the project (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981, pp. 1-5).

There was confusion about what resident management could or should accomplish and about how to assess the extent to which it had worked. Nevertheless, to both the MDRC and NAHRO observers, it seemed that several resident management corporations (RMCs) had enjoyed modest success as managers and community leaders. "Success" was measured in a variety of ways: (1) changes in certain management performance indicators such as collecting rents and making repairs on units; (2) tenant responses to structured questionnaires; and (3) quite detailed field observations by project staff and unstructured interviews with local people.

Based on such data, project staff drew several important conclusions:

1. RMCs with good housing authority and tenant relations tend to have stronger resident councils and better performance indicators (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981, pp. 2, 8, 45, 47, 60, 89-93, 97, 101-102, 121-122, 176-178; Kolodny, 1983, pp. 55-56).
2. RMCs with strong leaders tend to have better performance indicators and more effective resident involvement (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981, pp. 38, 68-69, 73).
3. RMCs that develop better ties to local leaders other than those in the housing authority tend to have better performance indicators (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981, pp. 71, 175; Kolodny, 1983, p. 51).
4. Sites with more effective community organizations have RMCs with stronger resident councils and better performance indicators (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981, pp. 21-22, 41, 45, 51, 55, 59, 69, 84-85, 204-205; Kolodny, 1983, pp. 47, 52-53, 61).

The latter two conclusions were drawn primarily from the NAHRO study, which had the advantage of examining older RMCs. The authors of both studies appreciated the tentativeness of their findings. Yet they spoke warmly about the potential of resident management as an alternative to conventional housing authority management.

The potential they saw has remained largely unrecognized. Only one of the original MDRC sites still has some degree of resident management. A second site that lost its contract is working to reclaim it. If one were to look only at their longevity, it would be easy to conclude that resident management does not have much of a future in this country.

### **The NCNE Demonstration Project**

The continuing interest in resident management is attributable to the apparent success of several RMCs and its appeal both to conservative groups and to many tenants. Conservative groups seek, in general terms, to eliminate the government's role in providing low-income housing. Tenant groups see resident management as a way to empower themselves and acquire better housing. Some wish to buy their sites. Others do not. Many conservatives, on the other hand, see resident management only as a stepping stone to resident ownership (Peterman, 1988a, 1988b).

The National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (NCNE), a minority self-help organization, is one such conservative group. It acquired a sizeable grant from the AMOCO Foundation to initiate and improve resident management in several cities. The author served as an independent evaluator of the project from July 1986 to August 1987. A good part of his work involved an assessment of each site's organizational strengths and weaknesses.

The selection of sites for the NCNE demonstration project was based on criteria identical to those MDRC had used a decade earlier. Fourteen sites were considered for inclusion. One elected not to participate. Two others were dropped because they lacked a substantial tenant organization. The remaining 11 sites were quite varied.

Five sites have had resident management contracts for six or more years: Bromley Heath, Boston; A. Harry Moore, Jersey City; Kenilworth-Parkside, Washington, D.C.; Carr Square and Cochran Gardens, St. Louis. Three sites were working to receive their first contract or had only recently been awarded one: LeClaire Courts, Chicago; Lakeview Terrace, Cleveland; St. Thomas, New Orleans. Three sites had lost their RMC contracts: Iroquois Homes, Louisville; B.W. Cooper and St. Bernard, New Orleans. Only the last two were working toward receiving new contracts. (A Harry Moore, Iroquois Homes, and B.W. Cooper had been part of the MDRC demonstration.)

All would be characterized as "family sites." Cochran Gardens and Lakeview Terrace each have one building set aside for elderly residents. Bromley Heath, Cochran Gardens, and A. Harry Moore are high-rise sites. The others, with the exception of the one high-rise building for the elderly in Cleveland, are low-rise sites.

A variety of data was collected at these sites and from their respective housing authorities and local governments. No analysis of census reports, crime statistics, or housing authority records will be presented here. These data are in the process of being assembled and merged. Nor will the results of a survey conducted at Carr Square and LeClaire Courts be presented. Reported here will be a summary of unstructured interviews conducted with RMC leaders, residents, housing authority personnel, police and social service workers, area businessmen and politicians, and NCNE staff who visited each site more regularly than did the project evaluator. Included in these summaries are the author's own observations of public and staff meetings, training sessions, and the behavior of residents during site visits.

The findings presented in this article relate to the organization of resident management corporations. In effect, we will be considering the structural strengths and weaknesses of RMCs as they are seen by the people who work with and for them. Much detailed information could be presented. Three things militate against that being done: (1) space; (2) the sensitivity of some information; and (3) the anonymity guaranteed to all informants.

The findings will be organized around the four conclusions drawn from the earlier MDRC and NAHRO studies. Nevertheless, the present work should be considered exploratory rather than definitive for at least two reasons. First, there was nothing random in the selection of sites reviewed in any of the studies. Second, we still know so little about RMCs that much of what is learned must be of a descriptive rather than analytical nature. An advantage of the present study is that sites with varying degrees of experience as RMCs were included in it. It also included more sites than did previous studies.<sup>2</sup> For all these reasons, it is best to view the present effort in terms of generating a testable hypothesis rather than as a conclusive statement about the past and future of resident management.

### **Finding 1: Good Housing Authority and Tenant Relations Produce More Effective RMCs**

The authors of the MDRC and NAHRO reports assumed that good relations between a specific site and its housing authority were a prerequisite to building an effective RMC. The criteria for selecting sites in all existing RMC studies certainly reflected that idea. One should not be terribly surprised, then, that previous observers have made much of this point.

A decidedly different picture emerged from discussions with knowledgeable observers of the 11 sites in the NCNE project. RMCs whose relations with the local housing authority were either especially close or nasty did not seem to make much progress as community organizers or property managers. RMCs and housing authorities whose relations exhibited a degree of "creative tension" were thought to have made greater progress.

Before describing in a bit more detail how this is the case, it would be useful to note that the MDRC study did acknowledge on numerous occasions just how unequal the "partnership" was between RMC sites and housing authorities. The housing authority often withheld important powers (e.g., control over the site's budget) and previously agreed-upon levels of assistance. It also interfered with tenant efforts to become more independent. Such behavior played a part in the failure of several RMCs in the MDRC project.

Relations between the 11 NCNE sites and their respective housing authority varied. Two (Bromley Heath and A. Harry Moore) had especially good relations. Two others (Lakeview Terrace and Iroquois Homes) had relatively poor relations. The remaining seven usually were able to work with their housing authority in a fairly open, if not always congenial, manner.

It is not the contractual arrangement between an RMC and housing authority that defines how good its relations are. The Bromley Heath RMC exercises a good deal of control over its own budget, for instance; but so too do Carr Square and Cochran Gardens, Kenilworth-Parkside, and Lakeview Terrace. Only Bromley Heath has consistently good relations with its housing authority, however. "Good relations" are more a matter of how much latitude the housing authority is willing to give the RMC and how much the RMC is willing to take.

The willingness to give or take more responsibility is largely a matter of personal choice and trust. Close personal ties between the RMC leadership at Bromley Heath or A. Harry Moore and housing authority officials make it difficult for either site to move beyond its current level of performance in property management or community organizing. Neither the RMC nor the housing authority is willing to jeopardize those personal relations by demanding much more from the other.

The absence of any appreciable degree of trust and rapport between the RMCs and housing authorities in Cleveland or Louisville, on the other hand, proved quite an impediment to the RMC's progress. Iroquois Homes lost its RMC contract because it could not or would not work out some basic disagreements on renting or staff policies with the Louisville housing authority. Lakeview Terrace's RMC will not lose its contract, but it has not handled either its staff or budget to the housing authority's satisfaction. There is so much personal animosity between these sites and housing authorities that neither can demand more from the other or expect a civil response to such a demand.

Leaders at the remaining seven sites can and do have civil relations with their housing authority. Some are taken more seriously than others—a fact that is attributable to the sophistication of the tenant leaders. They all can work with their housing authorities, however, even if they often disagree.

For instance, both St. Louis sites obtained full management contracts for the first time in their existence only in 1986. This represents a real step forward and reflects improved relations with housing authority. At the same time, neither site has obtained a contract that enables it to carry out all the responsibilities assumed to fall to such an operation. Their relations with the housing authority are more civil and workable than at any time in the past decade, but a residue of mistrust and "unfinished business" remains. The same could be said of the three sites in New Orleans and LeClaire Courts in Chicago, which are trying to regain or win a new RMC contract. It is true also of the Kenilworth-Parkside RMC, which has moved steadily forward in its efforts to acquire modernization funds and to buy its buildings.

The point of these comparisons is this: Good working relations between an RMC and its housing authority do not necessarily yield good things for the site. In fact, they can serve to limit the ability of both parties to recognize and deal with substantial problems at the site. Antagonism between an RMC site and the housing authority also can contribute to a state of affairs in which their relations are viewed as "weak."

The "weakness" of an RMC's relations with the housing authority reflects the failure of each party to perform its role in a satisfactory way. The housing authority really may not be sympathetic to resident management. This may be due to political and personal differences among the parties, but the effect is the same. The housing authority may do little to help the RMC overcome its difficulties and may quietly contribute to them. RMC leaders, for their part, can contribute to this situation by not fulfilling their obligations as "managers" or "community leaders" particularly well. If the experiences of these 11 housing sites can be generalized, it suggests that performing inadequately as both a manager and community leader can lead to the RMC's demise.

If there is one lesson to learn from the way different public housing sites interact with their housing authority, it is this: A sustained level of "creative tension" must exist between the site and housing authority for the RMC to improve its performance as both a "manager" and "community leader." Too cozy or too hostile a relationship, no matter

what its basis, will retard the progress of the RMC. The idea that relations ought not be too friendly is important. It contradicts a central tenet of the most widely cited study of RMCs—the one completed by the MDRC several years ago—and much popular and political opinion on the subject.

### **Finding 2: Strong Site Leadership Produces a More Effective RMC**

The authors of previous studies on resident management stressed that strong site leadership improved an RMC's performance as a property manager and community organizer. Though some attention was paid to the strength of a resident council or board, greater emphasis was put on the existence of a few key people at each site. Such persons, it was thought, can draw the residents together and deal effectively with the housing authority.

The present research confirms this thinking, but only up to a point. Much more important is the presence of a strong board or resident council. The single strong leader is better at articulating a position for the site but also is more likely to be unable or unwilling to prepare new leaders or entertain alternative views on issues of concern to all residents. A strong resident group appears able to arrive at decisions and carry them out on a routine basis more effectively and democratically than a single leader.

No existing or prospective RMC has faced the problem of transferring power to a second generation of leaders. It is unusual for RMCs to last long enough for this to become an issue. Among those sites in the NCNE project, however, four patterns of leadership were evident:

1. strong leader and compliant board (i.e., Lakeview Terrace, A. Harry Moore, Bromley Heath, Kenilworth-Parkside);
2. strong leader and assertive board (i.e., Cochran Gardens and Carr Square);
3. no strong leader and assertive board (i.e., B.W. Cooper, St. Thomas, and LeClaire Courts);
4. no strong leader and compliant board (i.e., St. Bernard and Iroquois Homes).

Sites with strong leaders and compliant boards had been able to articulate positions on matters of greater and lesser significance for some time. They also enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy and, in several cases, had acquired substantial funds to rehabilitate apartments or whole buildings. On the other hand, these sites also were viewed as places with inbred leadership that did not necessarily respond well or at all to demands for change by residents.

A commonly heard complaint at A. Harry Moore and Bromley Heath was that long-term leaders had grown comfortable with conditions at the site. It was also said that they did not work hard to develop new leaders among the residents and tended to do whatever was needed to satisfy housing authority officials. The situation at Lakeview Terrace and Kenilworth-Parkside was different. There, strong leaders simply pursued whatever policies they preferred, even in the face of residents' opposition. Charges of misfeasance and electoral fraud have plagued Lakeview Terrace's leadership since shortly after it gained control of the site's budget and board. The courts have reviewed the situation. In the Washington D.C. site, the problem is different. The removal of poor but otherwise good

tenants to make room for new ones who had jobs and could afford to buy their apartment units has bothered many people at Kenilworth-Parkside. Still, it has not deterred the site's leader from pursuing plans for homeownership across the site.

Sites with weak leaders and boards accomplish nothing, except perhaps their own demise as an RMC. Certainly that was what happened at Iroquois Homes, where neither the leader nor the board could extract much loyalty from residents or cooperation from the housing authority. St. Bernard is not likely to regain an RMC contract for much the same reason. Its "leaders" are unable to excite much interest in resident management on the site and even find it hard to acquire a quorum at many board meetings.

Sites with strong leaders and more assertive boards probably are in the best position to take advantage of new opportunities and carry out routine chores. This does not guarantee, however, that they will do so. Cochran Gardens has a resident council whose members are bright and generally experienced. Some new, aggressive people have been brought onto the council. Yet these remain too dependent upon their leader, Bertha Gilkey, for guidance and have not yet demonstrated their independence. Long-term problems, such as how to deal with families that fail to declare all their income, may go unaddressed. Short-term problems, such as consulting with the council during negotiations over the RMC contract, may not be taken seriously enough. Routine problems in operating a housing site are usually handled promptly and well. This is a tribute to how well-organized Cochran's operations are. Given the extensiveness of those operations, however, the organization that is in place should be better prepared to anticipate and address some "bigger" issues, whose presence constitutes a real but unappreciated threat to the site's continued well-being.

Carr Square's leader, Loretta Hall, has a more experienced board and a smaller organization to run. Though lacking the entrepreneurial flair of Cochran's organization, this RMC seems better able to raise and discuss matters of short- and long-term interest to its site. There is better consensus on what their problems are and how to deal with them. The capacity of the organizations to do this on a regular basis is important in its own right. Absent the authority or resources to implement their plans, the problems may remain and even grow. However, the problems and alternative solutions to them do not go unrecognized or undiscussed.

The leaders and board members at each site have begun to explore ways of increasing the number of persons who can eventually move into positions of responsibility. This is important for many reasons. Most significantly, it reveals a tolerance for divergent views and democratic procedures that is absent in other more established RMCs.

Sites with no strong leader and an assertive board can do some things well. They seem especially good at developing a cadre of interested and involved residents. In the case of the NCNE sites that fall into this category, it may be because they were all working to acquire an RMC contract. They had to work hard to demonstrate both the need and the capacity for leadership.

The LeClaire Courts and B.W. Cooper groups showed greater promise than did the group at St. Thomas. A good part of the reason was the ability of the leaders to move beyond acting as caseworkers for their fellow residents. They also evidenced better organizational skills (e.g., negotiating with outside agencies, delegating responsibilities, and following through on proposed activities). Whether they will show the same entrepreneurial flair as sites with strong, sometimes charismatic leaders remains to be seen.

The point is that they have acted more earnestly to bring the disparate elements of their resident populations together than have several of the better-known and established sites.

If the findings of the present study can be generalized, then one might expect greater long-term success from sites with a conscientious group of residents able to exercise control. Contrary to previously published reports on the subject, the existence of one or two strong leaders at a site does not guarantee the RMC's success as a property manager or community organizer. Sites that have neither strong leaders nor assertive resident boards are not likely to last long enough as RMCs to have much of an impact.

### **Finding 3: Sites With Good Ties to Institutions Other Than the Housing Authority are Likely to Do Better**

This point received little attention in the MDRC study. Indeed, it is understandable that most of a site's emphasis, at least initially, must be on its relation to the local housing authority. In the long run, however, it is important for an RMC to do business with other organizations. This constitutes a show of independence. It also expands the number and variety of resources available to the RMC. A site blessed with certain "locational advantages" and a good organization is not likely to make much progress if its leaders are complacent or unable to articulate a broader vision of their site's role in the community. By the same token, people who can make such arguments convincingly can bring some resources to their sites, even if those sites are poorly located and have an unsophisticated organization working in their behalf.

The NCNE sites exhibited different levels of involvement with public and private leaders. Three had been quite successful at acquiring outside support (Carr Square, Cochran Gardens, and Kenilworth-Parkside). Two others had begun to make such contacts (Bromley Heath and LeClaire Courts). The remaining six had not.

A good location can help. Both Carr Square and Cochran Gardens are near downtown St. Louis and managed to attract private investments for economic development projects they sponsored. LeClaire Courts' proximity to redevelopment work occurring in its area certainly could help in the same way. Lakeview Terrace also is in the path of redevelopment work taking place on the outskirts of downtown Cleveland. Its leader has had discussions with a developer; but it is not clear whether the site and the RMC can be preserved in the wake of redevelopment work.

A bad location need not deter an RMC from acquiring new public and private resources. Both Bromley Heath and Kenilworth-Parkside are located in relatively unattractive parts of the city. Yet they have managed to acquire some public money to rehabilitate apartments, some assistance from private corporations or institutions, or an occasional contract to perform services outside the site. The successes can be attributed to the leader's ability to work with a variety of public and private groups.

Even a group unaccustomed to working in this way can hope to overcome a bad location. The A. Harry Moore and St. Thomas sites are good illustrations of this point. The former is in a ward that stretches from the Hudson River through part of Jersey City's midsection. A. Harry Moore is located at the far western edge of the ward. Though separated from the redevelopment going on along the riverfront, the ward's alderman is interested in tying its economic expansion to A. Harry Moore. The idea is to extract jobs for A. Harry Moore residents in exchange for preferential treatment and building sites for



riverfront developers. The involvement of A. Harry Moore would be predicated on the ability of site leaders to improve its appearance and community organization. The St. Thomas site in New Orleans is contiguous to an old industrial and warehouse district that may be undergoing some modest redevelopment.

To what extent the other sites in the NCNE project can overcome their locational disadvantages and histories of inactivity is not known. What can be said with some certainty is that outside sponsors can help an established or new RMC. The LeClaire Courts group is a good case in point. The site's resident council, although young and inexperienced, shows great promise. Leadership at the site is comparatively deep, and support for the resident council among residents, by all reports, is good. However, LeClaire Courts' "ace in the hole" is the Clarence Darrow Center, which is a branch of the Hull House organization. This social service center has provided good political and business contacts for the site and no small amount of technical assistance. Such things were acquired only gradually by Carr Square, Cochran, and Kenilworth-Parkside. The LeClaire Courts resident council had enjoyed them even before it became an RMC. This dimension of an RMC's development should receive more attention in future studies.

#### **Finding 4: Sites With Good Community Organizing Tend to Have More Effective RMCs**

The existence of a viable and effective community organization at RMC sites was almost taken for granted by the authors of the MDRC and NAHRO reports. On the one hand, great emphasis was placed on the apparent strength of a resident group at each site. On the other hand, the authors made continuous references to the existence of factions among residents and the manner in which housing authorities were able to bully or ignore resident groups at the RMC sites. In the end, perhaps, a site's community organization was viewed as something that varies from place to place, and whose strength and resistance cannot be taken for granted.

The observations of informed persons at each NCNE site and city suggest that a stronger statement is necessary. To wit, the single most important factor in the success or failure of an RMC is the degree of support it enjoys among the residents at the site. A site that receives little or no modernization money can still maintain a good appearance if its residents work together. In the absence of a well-organized and disciplined community, however, no amount of money will keep a site looking neat and clean. The site will not become or remain a good and safe place to live without a well-organized community and the enforcement of rules regarding acceptable behavior and practices at the site.

The resident councils at sites with poorly organized populations, at least until recently, have not worked consistently or hard to mobilize their communities. Neither has support by residents for the resident councils been greatly apparent. At two sites (Iroquois Homes and Lakeview Terrace), there has been strong resistance to the resident council.

Two other resident councils with a "weak" community organization (A. Harry Moore and B.W. Cooper) have begun to improve their performance. One, the B.W. Cooper group, is doing much better than the other, however. Continued hard work on their parts could yield handsome dividends for each during the next few years. Some of these dividends, (e.g., greater participation by residents, publication of a newsletter, and independence from the housing authority) already are in evidence at B.W. Cooper. The

A. Harry Moore group has begun to meet more regularly with residents and to lessen its dependence on the resident manager's staff to handle problems. By the end of 1987, however, it had shown little inclination to see that problems at the site were being resolved in a competent fashion.

Similarly, two other groups show little sign of making any immediate progress. St. Bernard's resident council is weak, and it is dominated by people who have no apparent enthusiasm for pulling the community together. St. Thomas's resident council appears more eager than St. Bernard's to work, but has shown little ability to organize the community or to behave in a disciplined way. If St. Thomas has any chance of becoming an RMC, it will be only after several years of extremely hard work and the introduction of more enlightened leadership.

Those groups said to have a relatively strong community organization appear to receive considerable support from a good portion of their resident populations. None is thought of so highly that everyone at the site supports it, which is not necessarily a negative point. Indeed, a good case might be made for a resident council that does not always make everyone happy. What distinguishes these groups from one another are the reasons for some residents' displeasure and the resident council's response.

There are two patterns. The two younger groups (Kenilworth-Parkside and LeClaire Courts) are still building their base of support and a consensus that a resident management corporation probably enforces more rules and does so more strictly than the housing authority. These are difficult lessons to teach and learn. It takes time to publicize the message and for people to learn new habits. It appears that the leadership at both sites, with a few notable lapses, is trying to push this process along as quickly as possible. The degree to which these groups are able to make progress will depend on how consistently they make and enforce reasonable rules for behavior at the site. Any hint of hypocrisy on the leaders' parts can undermine much good work, and do so quickly. This has become a problem at Kenilworth-Parkside, where poor residents objected to being removed from their apartments.

Two older RMCs (Bromley Heath and Carr Square) long ago established an effective base of support among many of their residents. For different reasons, however, they have not sought to expand that base or have seen it shrink in recent years. Gradual progress is being made by the Bromley Heath RMC to rehabilitate vacant and vandalized apartments. The quality of the work is said to have been excellent, though there is some question about how well it has held up over the years. (Similar work undertaken at Cochran was completed more quickly but with results that probably are not as good as those being achieved at Bromley Heath.) Whether it is the slow pace of rehabilitation efforts, the unwillingness or inability of the RMC to enforce tough standards and mobilize all buildings on the site, complacent leadership, an uncontrollable population, or any combination of these things, the result is the same. It is clear that the Bromley Heath RMC does not enjoy the support of at least a portion of its residents and cannot expect these people to help keep the site clean, or perhaps even safe. Whether the base of the RMC's support has shrunk is not known. It obviously is not increasing, though.

The problem at Carr Square is different. There, the absence of modernization assistance and the availability of attractive market rate and subsidized rental units in the immediate neighborhood are draining many of Carr Square's most dependable supporters. The level of support for the RMC is quite high—probably higher than at Cochran. Nevertheless, the

organizational base that provided the RMC with the muscle and manpower to keep the site in relatively good shape—given its deteriorating condition—is being drained. This process has accelerated in the last few years, and the RMC is almost powerless to reverse it. The recent “dumping” of “homeless families” with unruly children and an uncaring attitude toward the site has compounded this problem. Nothing in the RMC’s new contract will give it added authority to deal with these problems. Now that a full-blown contract does exist, however, the RMC is assumed by some residents to have such authority. This does not make the RMC’s job any easier.

What distinguishes Cochran’s community organization is not the existence of unanimity among residents or the absence of conflict. Cochran’s RMC has never enjoyed the support of all residents at the site, nor has it avoided nasty fights with some elements in the population, and this has been a drawback. What is distinctive about Cochran’s community organization is its ability to lay down and enforce rules for acceptable behavior *despite* such “shortcomings.” People may not like the RMC or some of its policies; but the hallways and grounds generally remain clean, people are secure, and the routine business of running a site is carried out. Problem families are not ignored in Cochran, any more than they are at Carr Square. Building and floor captains are constantly working with them. However, this intervention does lead to bad feelings on the part of some people who feel harassed, and who sometimes are.

The lessons from the experiences of these RMCs are clear. First, a well-organized community is a prerequisite to having a successful RMC. Such a community can help to cover or compensate for the shortcomings of an RMC and its ability to carry out its responsibilities. Second, a poorly organized community can undermine the best led and professional RMC. A successful RMC is not only, or even first, a good property manager. It is a good community organizer. Those RMCs that are reported to have trouble achieving or sustaining an acceptable level of performance as a property manager are those that have trouble or no interest in keeping the community well organized.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this study are at odds with several conclusions reached in the earlier MDRC and NAHRO projects. Part of the disagreement may be attributed to the way field observations were made or the fact that different sites were examined. Part of the disagreement may be due to the fact that I had the advantage of studying a number of relatively mature RMCs. Other things could be happening, however. Conditions change. Some of the good things previous authors saw occurring did not continue. Some of the problems observed in the late 1970s were never addressed and became more serious. Groups that might have flourished did not. Groups that were barely surviving failed. Looking back, it is easy to see that earlier authors were too optimistic. They ascribed greater significance to small positive signs of progress than to several fundamental problems built into the way RMCs were organized and worked.

A good place to start is to look at the relation between the RMC and its housing authority. In both the MDRC and NAHRO studies, it was said that relations between the site and housing authority need to be “cooperative.” At the same time, the authors recognized that the residents’ willingness to defer to housing authority personnel or to be controlled by them had retarded the progress made by some RMCs. The original MDRC

demonstration project was said to be modeled after the "success" of Carr Square and Cochran Gardens in St. Louis. Yet in each MDRC site the RMC was created at the initiation of project staff and housing authority officials. In St. Louis, the groups that succeeded were those that had been willing and able to maintain some independence from the housing authority and that had frequently clashed with it. The RMCs in St. Louis were created by the residents, not for them (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981, pp. 93, 97, 102).

MDRC staff did not encourage such independence for at least two reasons. First, they needed to keep on friendly terms with both the residents and housing authority officials. Second, they did not conceive of RMCs as a means by which public housing residents would gain much independence. Resident management was viewed more as a means to decentralize some housing authority responsibilities and to create a bit more stability in the resident population (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981, pp. 5, 22-23, 99; Kolodny, 1983, p. 19).

The rhetoric used by the authors of these reports, and often by the residents themselves, can be ambitious, even radical. References to concepts such as "empowerment" or "self-determination" are not unusual. The organization created and nurtured at resident-managed sites, however, usually is a good deal more conventional than the language used to describe it.

The more successful RMCs learn how to balance this rhetoric against the reality of working with distinctly non-radical corporations, banks, bureaucrats, and elected officials. They build coalitions that involve such parties. They do not rely for assistance on the local housing authority, or on any single outside party, for that matter. The less successful RMCs, or those that fail altogether, are unable or unwilling to move beyond the "special" relationship they have developed with the local housing authority.

Public housing residents clearly display in their resident councils the ability and willingness to balance the rhetoric of self-determination against the need for compromise. Those sites with little or no hope of gaining greater independence have neither ambitious leaders nor strong boards. Resident council members continually fret about their inability to deal with problems on the site, but they take no firm steps to address these problems. Sites with strong leaders are better able to consolidate some power on the site and bring in resources, often substantial resources, to address some problems. Yet their inability or unwillingness to share with a greater number of residents the burdens and fruits of operating an RMC limits the effectiveness of the board and the entire RMC experiment. RMCs with stronger boards or resident councils have a clearer vision of what can and cannot be accomplished. They also seem better able to act in concert once a decision has been made to move in a given direction.

The authors of the MDRC report probably were wrong when they suggested "that no more than one forceful leader need emerge in order for the board as a whole to function successfully" (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1981, p. 240). Five of the sites appear to have such leaders (Lakeview Terrace, A. Harry Moore, Bromley Heath, Kenilworth-Parkside, and Cochran Gardens). Only Cochran Gardens has a moderately assertive board, and only Cochran Gardens has a site that maintains a good appearance most of the time and residents who usually work to keep it that way.

The other two sites that generally look better and have better-behaved residents are Carr Square and LeClaire Courts. They have relatively strong and active resident councils, but

lack a dominant or charismatic leader. The only resident group working to regain an RMC contract that has a good chance of succeeding as an RMC is B.W. Cooper. Its board has become stronger over the last two years.

The lesson is clear. A resident management corporation can be helped, or hindered, by an extremely strong leader. However, it is essential that a resident management corporation have a strong board or resident council.

Strong boards, as I noted above, are not created by sympathetic outsiders or housing authority officials. They emerge from the hard work of committed individuals living at the site. Contrary to the findings in the NAHRO study, creating a resident management corporation does not enhance the ability of tenants to organize (Kolodny, 1983, p. 73). It is the ability of tenants to organize that enhances the likelihood that an RMC can be created and will be successful. One cannot put the resident management "cart" before the community organization "horse" and expect either the animal or the vehicle to which it is attached to make much progress.

The implications of this study are important. Current legislation and private efforts intended to encourage people living in public housing to create resident management corporations are not likely to succeed, unless the people living at those sites already are demonstrating the ability to organize themselves and deal effectively with troublemakers on and off the site. There are many things that must happen at a public housing site before a resident management corporation can be successfully put in place. Some of these things have been noted here. The very first thing to do, however, is to make a tough-minded assessment of the resident organization's strengths and weaknesses. This accomplished, a more reasoned judgment can be made as to whether and what kinds of resources might be made available to nurture the group in question. Of course, a relatively well-organized group will be able to make a substantial contribution to such talks. A poorly organized group will not know what it needs, much less request it.

The new "Housing and Community Development Act of 1987" makes it possible for many public housing sites to become managed and owned by their residents. Yet little is known about what makes a resident-managed site more or less successful. In this article, I have considered some of the things that can help and that can hurt the chances for effective resident management. To the extent that the observations made here are taken seriously, advocates of resident management need to consider first and foremost the strength and viability of the organization entrusted with assuming such a responsibility. Otherwise, groups with no realistic chance of becoming effective resident managers who are awarded control of their sites will eventually fail. Their failures could lead to the mistaken conclusion that resident management itself cannot work. Some of the conditions that might increase an RMC's effectiveness have been discussed in this article.

The findings presented here are, of course, not the "final word" on the organizational strengths and weaknesses of established or nascent RMCs. They should be considered for what they are: tentative conclusions drawn from a select sample of sites. That the sites in question were more numerous and varied than those examined in previous studies adds some strength to findings described in this article. However, it does not reduce the need for a more systematic study of existing and former RMC sites or non-RMC sites compared to less and more experienced RMC sites. The findings offered here can provide a good basis for organizing such a study and testing some important hypotheses about this alternative to conventionally managed public housing sites.

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## NOTES

1. An exception to this is Robert Rigby (1982), *The Residents as Resource: A Public Housing Management Demonstration in Jersey City*.
2. There exists no reliable count of how many resident management corporations currently exist. Estimates vary, but it is probably safe to say that up to 24 are currently operating across the United States. How representative the NCNE sites are in comparison to those other RMC sites, or to other public housing sites in general, is not known.

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