

“Community Collaboration”

Project Overview and Method:

Many low-income families face difficult problems on a daily basis. Unlike higher income families and individuals, many of these problems relate to daily functioning. Healthy food access, access to healthcare and making ends meet to pay bills and provide for their expenses can all pose problems. More importantly, housing remains a large issue for low-income individuals. Since Lexington has a substantial low-income population, we feel as if many local citizens face these issues.

The purposes of this community-based research project is to evaluate needs of low-income residents of Lexington not met by the local community and to unveil opportunities that exist for further community collaboration between local non-profit agencies.

Mountain View Terrace Apartments (“MVT”), a Section-8 housing development funded under the national Housing and Urban Development branch (“HUD”) was the cohort for our research. After speaking with MVT Director Marilyn Alexander, we gained approval for conducting interviews with Mountain View Terrace tenants. Along with these interviews, we conducted several interviews with local non-profit leaders to identify programs and partnerships that already exist and barriers to the delivery of services from particular organizations. Lastly, we compiled research on low-income housing developments in the comparable city of Waynesboro to determine other practices that could be implemented at Mountain View Terrace to better serve the needs of the tenants and potentially other low-income residents in Lexington.

History of Public Housing in U.S.

The United States Housing Act was passed in 1937 and included an extensive portion entitled “Section VIII: Lower Income Housing Assistance.” The goals of the Housing Act for low-income housing include providing safe, decent housing for low-income individuals, and promoting and creating economically mixed housing developments.¹ Section 8 public housing units receive funding from the National Housing and Urban Development Office, referred to as “HUD.” Tenants who live in Section 8 housing pay no more than 30 percent of their income towards rent, and lower income brackets may pay nothing at all. HUD also offers Section 8 Vouchers that help families to “subsidize” their rent in any apartment unit, while still only paying 30 percent of their income. HUD covers the remainder of the rent through the voucher given to these families.

Reform of the U.S. Housing Act and public housing programs between 1994-1998 raised standards for housing developments and developed the Hope VI model. Within this model, HUD aimed to destroy and reduce decrepit Section 8 housing developments. The trend changed from high-rise housing buildings which had resulted solely in a dangerous, run-down facilities full of drugs and poor maintenance to that of apartment complexes and town home styles which may be safer, cleaner and easier to maintain. Lexington’s only “high rise” existed in the privately owned home of Robert E. Lee, which provided housing assistance when they housed tenants. The assistance no longer exists in the property, and the home did not experience the

¹ *Public Housing in the 21st Century*

drug problems and dilapidation of most of the high-rise public housing.²

Future Plans for HUD and Lexington

HUD's newest development trends towards a change in public housing developments. The push moves away from the current state of public housing that has proved to be ineffective over the years. The revitalization program of Hope VI exemplifies the desire to restore unkempt and decrepit public housing developments. HUD has also realized that the program cannot adapt easily to specific needs of single communities or troubled development.³ This undermines effective oversight and unnecessarily results in micromanagement of the Public Housing Authorities. Marilyn also expressed concerns with HUD in this area. Achieving self-sufficiency and an opportunity of home ownership remains the ultimate goal of HUD. The natural progression of an individual often moves from public housing to Section 8 public housing to low-income to tax credit programs unit in a Hope VI development to self-sufficiency. HUD has also expressed interest in mixed-income housing. This would mean a voucher program, and an integration of lower income into the mainstream of the community.

Interestingly, Lexington also appears to also be undertaking this model. Marilyn's grandfather owned property across from MVT known as Thompson's Knoll. Marilyn's family sold the property to Bruce Switzer whose sister is an architect in town. The project

² Interview with Marilyn Alexander

³ *Public Housing in the 21st Century*

of Thompson's Knoll partnered with the city and received grant money alongside the owner's investment to build twenty-four mixed-housing units on the lot. The grant money of approximately 700,000 dollars drives down the cost of the property. The groundbreaking ceremony commenced two weeks ago. The new owners of 1,200-1,500 square feet houses will pay for the lot and the house being built. The homeowners must meet income guidelines, which Marilyn thinks, will be along the same guidelines as Section 8 housing, but the homes will not be subsidized. However, low income individuals who fail to qualify for MVT but also struggle to meet the high rental demands of housing in Lexington will qualify for this "work force housing."⁴

This push from HUD and Lexington provides a positive direction. These goals combined with an increase of information provided to low-income individuals and community collaboration among organizations would mitigate barriers to services for low-income individuals and families in Lexington and other rural communities.

Affordable Housing Lexington, VA

In addition to the mixed income housing mentioned above, many organizations within Rockbridge County provide rental assistance as well as provide affordable housing options for low-income individuals and families. In terms of home ownership, Habitat for Humanity provides homes at low cost with low interest mortgages. Lexington's Threshold program renovates old houses, and these are on the market well-below market value.

⁴ Interview with Marilyn Alexander

RARA and Department of Social Services provide rent and utilities assistance. Other programs such as the Rural Development Program, Home Investment Partnership Program, Low Income Housing Tax Credit, housing choice vouchers, and help to alleviate the strain of meeting rental payments.

Nonetheless, affordable rental units remain an issue for many low-income individuals and families in Lexington, Virginia. 73.71 percent of people in Lexington report being in need of affordable housing.⁵ As previously discussed, subsidized project units such as Mountain View Terrace ensure that renters pay no more than 30 percent of their income. Other subsidized project units in Rockbridge Area include Valley view Apartments, Windmere, Lexington House, Treemont Apartments, and Greenhill. A tenant who recently moved in to MVT apartments expressed Mountain View Terrace as the only reasonable option.⁶ The tenant referred to Valley View Apartments, the other Section 8 housing development in the city, as the “Lexington ghetto.” Being a single parent with a middle-school child, he did not feel comfortable living there. However, he does not plan to remain at MVT for a long period of time. He looks forward to applying for and owning a Habitat for Humanity home and providing a more stable environment for his son.

Another interesting issue Marilyn raised was the effect student housing at Washington and Lee has on affordable housing in Lexington. A majority of students at both

⁵ Landry and Yadlin

⁶ Interview with anonymous MVT tenant

Washington and Lee University and Southern Virginia University live off-campus and therefore in the community for two years. Lexington City Planner, Bill Blatter, acknowledges the local concern about the effect of student participation in the rental market.⁷ The worry exists for an increased housing cost burden for local renters due to the student renters. As a member of City Council, Marilyn said this issue is occasionally raised. City Council must decide if they are going to continue renewing the high occupancy permits for landlords who are mostly renting to students.

Mountain View Terrace (MVT)

Mountain View Terrace Apartments (MVT), a local non-profit housing development, sits atop Diamond Hill, nestled in two cul-de-sacs situated off of North Lewis Street. The apartments are built townhouse style with six units attached in each portion. There are six separate buildings, one of which has all single-floor units that Director Marilyn Alexander tries to reserve for more elderly tenants. In total, MVT houses 40 apartments including four one-bedroom apartments, 18 two-bedroom apartments and 17 three-bedroom apartments. The remaining unit houses the office. Currently, six apartments remain vacant, and Marilyn has a waitlist of fifteen. Marilyn produces her own applications, but HUD approves the basic guidelines. Marilyn must follow the tenant selection plan and her HUD contractor reviews this process. HUD also maintains a strict policy that Marilyn may not rent to anyone with previous drug convictions. She also must follow the One Strike

⁷ Landry and Yadlin

Law that states a current tenant with a drug conviction must leave or Marilyn must evict them. This is a tough policy, as it can evict an entire family and take children out of a safe environment due to one family member's poor actions or decisions.⁸

Financing at MVT

Mountain View Terrace is a not for profit agency, funded as a Section 8 housing unit through HUD. For Lexington in particular, tenants who fall under the lowest income bracket do not pay anything to live at Mountain View Terrace. This lowest income bracket means that 30 percent of the tenants' median income falls below \$16,650 for a family of four. These families receive subsidies from HUD that allows them to live at MVT rent-free. If a household falls in to the "very low income" range, which is the middle bracket, a family of four earning more than \$27,750 and less than \$44, 400 must pay the entire contract rent price per month. For a family of four at MVT in a three-bedroom apartment, rent would be \$567 per month. The highest income bracket, ironically titled "low income," denotes the threshold level at which families no longer qualify to live at MVT. If a household of four earns more than \$44,400 they are not eligible to live at MVT and then face the difficulties highlighted later in finding other affordable, clean and safe housing options in Lexington.

Maintenance and Inspections

The buildings have brick first floors with sideboard second levels. Mountain View Terrace opened in 1972 making the structures over forty years old. The age of the

⁸ Interview with Marilyn Alexander

buildings is not a concern, however, as MVT received superior inspection scores during their last physical inspection by the Housing and Urban Development office. Every year HUD completes inspections of every Section 8 public housing developments in the United States. Due to the mass number of public housing developments, HUD uses contractors to complete the inspections. Marilyn also reports to the contractor assigned to MVT for any problems with mortgages, fair housing, or new construction. HUD and the mortgage company cover the cost for the inspection as part of the mortgage. Due to a lack of funding, HUD has temporarily postponed inspections for the next six months. MVT's last inspection occurred in July of 2011, and due to their quality examination, they will not receive another inspection for three years. This attributes to the work of Marilyn's husband, Rich, whose job requires that he attend to all of the property maintenance. While conducting our interviews, we were inside an apartment that had just been remodeled after a 20-year tenant moved out, and the maintenance and repair work was very impressive.⁹

Marilyn also completes an internal inspection once or twice a year as part of normal operations. Recently, she has noted that these inspections have demonstrated that not all tenants have requested maintenance when it is apparent they needed to do so. Marilyn also has commented that recent inspections by her have shown some tenants are not doing what they should be to care for the units. Marilyn and Rich try to strip and wax the floors and replace the blinds before a new tenant moves into a unit. MVT provides these niceties

⁹ Interview with Marilyn Alexander

when able to afford them. When a tenant leaves, Marilyn deducts from their security deposit for the cost of repairs of anything beyond normal wear and tear. MVT always covers the cost of normal wear and tear and does not receive any funding from HUD for these expenses. The tenants also expressed approval of Marilyn and Rich's work and attentiveness.¹⁰ These testimonials show the importance of having a well-kept area. We spoke with a tenant who moved into MVT two weeks ago. He explained that he complained about a small issue in the unit on a Friday, and Rich resolved the issue by the following Monday. The surrounding grounds also remain well maintained and liter-proof throughout the year.

Authority at MVT

At Mountain View Terrace, Marilyn and Rich hold responsibility for all of the housing development's operations. Marilyn's tasks involve looking through all the applications for new tenants, insuring that the tenants are doing a good job at taking care of their property, and reporting to HUD. Reports from the tenants show a deep respect for Marilyn.¹¹ She serves as both a social and political role model in their lives. Her husband does all of the maintenance of the property and housing units. Marilyn and Rich take care of the majority of the security. Marilyn says the tenants are more scared of her than her husband, but she is not really sure why. All the interviewed tenants reported feeling safe

¹⁰ Interview with anonymous MVT tenants

¹¹ Interview with anonymous MVT tenants

and comfortable at MVT.

Marilyn has noted that drug use has become more “commonplace” now, rather than being intermittent or isolated incidents. Therefore, she has made it abundantly clear that this behavior is not appropriate, nor will it be tolerated. She has been utilizing the police force more as well, and more consistent patrolling has helped with the frequency of these drug-related incidents. When it is absolutely necessary, she will call her good friend at the Police Department, Captain Miller, to come and watch over the property. This sends a message to the tenants. She recently did that this year because she said she wants to be proactive with any problems that may arise during the summer. Summertime is the hardest because everyone is outside when the weather is nice. The weather sometimes leads to trouble of heated tempers. To preserve confidentiality, Marilyn did not share

specific reports of the “trouble.”¹²

Comparisons with MVT and other Public Housing Units

Public housing maintains a necessary purpose for many individuals in Lexington as well as surrounding areas. Researching these housing developments allows for comparison of Marilyn’s job at Mountain View Terrace with other public housing units.

Greenstone Residents

Greenstone Residents in Waynesboro, VA provides housing for low-income individuals fifty-five years of age and older. Fifty-four units and over forty employees

¹² Interview with Marilyn Alexander

reside under one roof. The units consist mainly of efficiency one-bedroom single-family homes. Unlike MVT, Greenstone Residents does not receive funding from HUD but maintains an income limit for the residents and is tax credit. Tenants must qualify for housing based on income in tax credit programs. However, no subsidy for reduced rents exists, and the tenants pay a base price for each size unit.¹³ The housing development requires verification of the individuals' assets, checking account, IRA, 401k, etc.

Greenstone Residents hires in house-maintenance and an employee works security from 2:30 pm to midnight. The housing development currently operates below full capacity with a couple vacancies and no waiting list. Greenstone Residents solely provides housing.

However, a housing van directly transports residents free of charge on Monday and Thursday at 12:30 pm to anywhere that they would like to go. This allows residents to

access grocery stores and medical needs. The report from Greenstone Residents did not provide knowledge of current collaboration with other local non-profits.¹⁴

Dogwood Place

Dogwood Place in Waynesboro, VA owns eleven housing developments. Some of these properties are Section 8 public housing funded by HUD, and some are market properties. Similarly to Greenstone Residents, Dogwood Place also has tax credit properties for individuals fifty-five and older. Dogwood Place uses a hired maintenance

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Interview with Greenstone Residents

staff and a security person that handles several of the properties. Similarly to MVT, a subset of the organization is nonprofit. The nonprofit side hires four full-time property managers and three part-time managers. Dogwood Place also operates below full capacity with no waiting list. The housing development recruits via yellow book and newspaper advertisements and its website. It sometimes receives phone calls requesting an application and occasionally receives recommendations; however, this does not occur frequently with the subsidized housing units. The contact person reported an anecdotal story about a tenant who repeatedly paid rent late for months and months in a row. The housing development then requires a late fee. If the late fee becomes overdue, the tenant must go to court under fair housing. The tenant receives the charges for the trial, and all these additional costs causes increased failure to make rent, and the cycle continues until he or she may be asked to leave.¹⁵

Need for Community Collaboration

As evident by the term “public housing,” tenants in these housing developments must meet income guidelines. Therefore, these tenants maintain a low-income and often fall under the Federal Poverty Line. There remains a high likelihood that these tenants need assistance with services other than just housing. The MVT tenants reported using cash only and “hand to mouth.”¹⁶ This gap must be filled with other services from

¹⁵ Interview with Dogwood Place

¹⁶ Interview with anonymous MVT tenants

nonprofits or community organizations. A need for community collaboration exists. Available resources in the community must be accessible to public housing tenants, and these tenants need to be informed about their options for services.

Transportation

Transportation remains one of the largest issues facing the rural residents of Rockbridge County. Marilyn confirmed that this problem exists for many of her tenants at MVT as well. Her initiative as the Director of MVT recently benefitted her tenants. The Maury River Express, a bus system, runs a loop in Buena Vista and Lexington, with stops at both Kroger and Wal-Mart, the Free Clinic, several shopping centers and densely populated housing areas. Marilyn recently advocated for a stop near MVT apartments, citing the inability of her tenants to utilize the bus, when they are a population who is in need of its services, due to the previous stop locations. Now, the Maury River Express stops on Diamond Street, a close walk from MVT.¹⁷

The Maury River Express makes stops at the local Goodwill, and travels to Southern Virginia University (SVU), helping MVT residents who study at SVU with their commute and helping Lexington residents get to Buena Vista. The bus costs only \$0.50 a ride and children under six-years-old ride for free with an adult. The bus also runs to the Free Clinic and Stonewall Jackson Hospital to give tenants transportation to appointments at both

¹⁷ Interview with Marilyn Alexander

locations.¹⁸

For Lexington community members who may need to complete errands at locations not on a Maury River Express stop, they can utilize the Rockbridge Area Transportation System (RATS). This involves taxi-like services for customers and charges on a sliding scale based on income. Most MVT clients would fall into the lower two income tiers, meaning they only pay 40 or 60 percent of the traditional fare, depending on their income. RATS even makes runs to local regional health centers as far away as Roanoke or Charlottesville. RATS receives a refund for trips with patients who have Medicaid. RATS uses an agency called Logisticare to coordinate rides to medical centers, then Logisticare reimburses RATS for the cost of the trip. Marilyn noted that several tenants have used RATS in the past, particularly those who are elderly and have out of town medical

appointments.¹⁹

One drawback to this service is the unknown wait time when one needs a ride.

Therefore, the service may not be as useful for time-sensitive or emergency situations. Additionally, Medicaid users who may need a wheelchair or other special accommodations must make reservations five days in advance.

While all of the tenants we interviewed were aware of the Maury River Express' new stop in close proximity to the apartment complex, only one of the tenants had utilized the

¹⁸ Maury River Express

¹⁹ Rockbridge Area Transportation Services

bus service.²⁰ Tenants cited their own car, rides from friends and family, or riding bikes as alternative modes of transportation. The tenant who had ridden the Maury River Express used the service to get to the Free Clinic for an appointment. With RATS and the Maury River Express, however, MVT residents now have more options to meet their transportation needs, particularly for those who do not own a vehicle.

One area for improvement in the transportation realm could be the re-introduction of the Greyhound bus system. There was previously a greyhound bus that ran from Charlottesville to Roanoke, and stopped at the shopping center near Sears and Don Tequila's restaurant in Lexington. Now, without a car or bus system, some MVT tenants must depend on family members for transportation when they need to get to Roanoke for clothes or other shopping needs.

The Campus Kitchen at Washington and Lee (CKWL)

The Campus Kitchen works to fight food insecurity in Lexington and the surrounding Rockbridge County. CKWL partners with many organizations in town and many different programs that benefit local citizens. Campus Kitchen also partners with Mountain View Terrace Apartments, and we interviewed CKWL Coordinator, Jenny Davidson, to learn about this partnership. The Campus Kitchen serves MVT clients by delivering individual package cold meals to families' apartments on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons between 3:00-3:30. Currently, two families receive meals for a total

²⁰ Interview with anonymous MVT tenants

of six meals delivered on those three days. In fact, one of the tenants we interviewed receives meals for her family. All MVT tenants and families, however, are eligible for these meal deliveries. Once every year, Jenny reminds Marilyn of the meal delivery service.²¹ New clients are accepted at any point during the year, and all the family must do is notify Marilyn that they would like to start meal service.

School-age children of MVT tenants also qualify for the Backpack Program. The Backpack program provides non-perishable foods such as Nutri-Grain bars, fruit snacks and Easy Mac. Students, who are fed during the week at school, either with free or reduced lunches, receive this program to have a few extra healthy snacks during the weekend. Marilyn estimates 20 school-aged children who live in MVT housing, and any elementary school students who live there attend Central Elementary School, which is a partner with CKWL for the Backpack program. Due to their income bracket and their qualification to live in MVT housing, these students qualify for free or reduced lunches and therefore for the Backpack program. While we have confirmed that several children at MVT receive free or reduced lunch, we were unable to determine if any of the children have utilized the Backpack program.

The collaboration between the Campus Kitchen and MVT apartments would not be possible without Marilyn's role in the partnership. Marilyn is responsible for notifying the tenants of the individual meal programs. Marilyn keeps flyers for Campus Kitchens in her

²¹ Interview with Jenny Davidson

office, and one is inserted in the pile of papers tenants are given upon move-in. This, however, may not be the most effective manner in which to introduce tenants to the partnership with the Campus Kitchen. One of the tenants we spoke with had recently moved into MVT and remembered seeing a flyer about meal delivery. He did not, however, understand how the program worked or how he could begin meal service.

Marilyn must realize that she is an important figure in the success of this program and meeting the potential nutrition needs of tenants. Particularly since flyers are not permitted to be placed in mailboxes, Jenny Davidson has no real manner in which to publicize and inform MVT families about the meal delivery program. Lastly, meals can only be distributed through partner organizations, not simply to individuals, so MVT serves as the crucial link between families who may be food-insecure and meals from the Campus Kitchen. Marilyn could consider putting a small reminder in her quarterly newsletter about CKWL meal delivery and the BackPack program to remind tenants about their availability.

Delivering meals only three times a week and during the workday may prove as a barrier for the kitchen. A constraint exists for deliveries to these predetermined times because deliveries of other individual meals to other agencies in town coincide with this schedule. Only two families currently receive meals so the resource barriers for nonprofit organizations force MVT to be on the same schedule of other agencies. It would not be fiscally wise for the kitchen to try and create a different delivery day or time that would

result in more time and money. Similarly, the student Leadership Team, comprised entirely of W&L student volunteers, runs all of the Campus Kitchen shifts. If more families requested meals, then a potential would exist for a change in time that would be more suited to working individuals. Another possibility is an increase or change in the days, in which meals are delivered, but it would also require additional shifts for the members of the leadership team, and this would need to be deemed feasible as well.

The number of tenants requesting meals provides another barrier to an increase of meal delivery or a change in meal delivery time. As mentioned before, to receive a meal, a family or individual must notify Marilyn that they wish to begin meal delivery, and she will communicate this with Jenny Davidson. Meal delivery would start for that family on the next delivery day. As Marilyn expressed, getting tenants to sign up not the process of getting the meals presents the difficulty, as many are head strong and do not feel as though they want or need nutritional help. For this reason, families who are interested in meals but cannot make the time work may not be able to get meals as not enough families may request meals to warrant a time or day change. After speaking with Jenny Davidson following our presentation, she suggested the possibility that the meals be delivered at the end of the shift, around 5 pm, rather than at the beginning (the current 3-3:30 block). We look forward to hearing Marilyn's feedback on this time change and hope it would increase the number of tenants utilizing the meal service who may need it for some duration of time.

Lexington City Office on Youth (LCOOY)

The Lexington City Office on Youth holds one of only a few after-school programs in Lexington. Students from Kindergarten to eighth grade head to the “center” after school and do homework, have snacks, do art projects and play outside from 3:30 until their parents get off work around 5:00 pm. Director Tammy Dunn has formed relationships with most of the big non-profit agencies in town, and she has not experienced any difficulties with collaborating, as all agencies benefit economically by ensuring they have no overlap in services provided to the community.

Students mostly hear about the after school program through word of mouth, or because their parents attended the program at the center. Occasionally, Tammy said, students receive referrals to her program through the local schools.²² Currently, Tammy has three children who attend the Office on Youth on a regular basis that live in Mountain

View Terrace Apartments.

In addition to the after-school program, the LCOOY hosts a summer clinic with the Free Clinic, which greatly benefits the children. The health clinic provides dental care in a convenient location for children who attend the after-school program. During the school year, Tammy cites the students at VMI and W&L as a huge help. Members of the Campus Kitchen Student Leadership Team run three shifts a week at the Office on Youth, bringing healthy snacks for the students, helping with homework, and playing with the kids.

As previously stated, transportation remains the biggest barrier with most local

²² Interview with Tammy Dunn

agencies as well as students attending the after-school program. Children who attend Central Elementary school, such as the kids who live at MVT and attend the after school program, ride the bus to the center after school. Students who attend Waddell, however, must find alternate routes of transportation because no buses run for city schools. Since many parents are unable to pick up their children after school and drive them across town, Tammy tries to coordinate car pools for the kids who attend the afterschool program. Thankfully, for the children who live at MVT, they can walk home at the end of the program each day if their parents or guardians are unable to pick them up.

NEXT Program

NEXT is an after school enrichment program for students of Maury River Middle School. Director of NEXT, Paige Crawford, reports that advertisement for the program includes promotion at the school and in newsletters sent home to the children's families.²³ They also advertise through the newspaper and radio. Paige acknowledges problems with transportation because the buses do not stop at the children's homes in the evenings. The NEXT Program does partner with Washington and Lee University, Virginia Military Institution, YMCA, Boxerwood, FAIR, the Lexington Police, Rockbridge County High School, Central Elementary, Rockbridge Area Prevention Services, Project Horizon, and many individual community members. Paige believes that the "more the community invests in the education and enrichment of our young people, the more effective we will be in our

²³ Interview with Paige Crawford

efforts to reach all students.”²⁴ The program believes in building relationships and increasing opportunities for the students. NEXT program appears to be reaching and utilizing the community. Unfortunately, Paige was unsure whether Mountain View Terrace tenants utilize the after school program.

Rockbridge Area Relief Association

The Rockbridge Area Relief Association (RARA) located on Spottswood Drive, near Stonewall Jackson Hospital, offers emergency relief for anyone in the community who may need it due to job loss, a lack of resources, or low income. While many people perceive RARA as simply a food pantry, in actuality, it offers many more services to local households. RARA does not advertise its services because they do not solicit customers, but rather act as a last resort for citizens who need help during a tough period.

RARA offers food help, heat and utilities help, rent and mortgage aid, and can even help with transportation needs. RARA partners with several different agencies such as Total Action Against Poverty (TAP), local churches, and all other local non-profits, and these organizations refer needy clients to RARA. This arrangement works well since RARA Director Kitty Brown acknowledges that the majority of her clients also receives services and aid from other non-profit agencies.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Interview with Kitty Brown

RARA has helped MVT tenants in several different ways. One client who is currently out of work due to an injury has reached out to RARA for help in paying his bills. One of the largest problems during his bout of unemployment has been an inability to pay his telephone bill. Thus, as he applies for jobs around town, sometimes his phone company shuts off his services, and employers cannot reach him to set up interviews or offer him a position. RARA has helped this tenant by helping to cover his utility bills so he has more available funding to pay his telephone bill. Clients at MVT also reported utilizing the food pantry at RARA on occasion, but none seemed to imply regularity in their visits to the food pantry. A classmate's research found that very few, if any, Hispanic residents of Lexington utilize RARA; however, we were not able to either confirm or deny this at MVT. Although several Hispanic residents have applied to live at MVT in the past, when the documents to complete the application are requested, few return with them and the fully completed application.²⁶

Department of Social Services

The Department of Social Services (DSS) provides a wide range of both benefit and service programs. The Benefit Programs include Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, auxiliary grants, energy assistance, and SNAP (Food Stamps). The Service Programs include adult and child protective services, foster care, and adoptions. They also provide adult, employment, and day care services as well as basic information

²⁶ Interview with Marilyn Alexander

and referrals to their clients. These necessary services aid the low-income population in Rockbridge area, and DSS remains the sole provider of the majority of these services aside from food. Many of their clients utilize more than one of the indicated services. People find out about these services through public service announcements that are put out by the state office for local radio and newspapers. However, Meredith Downey, the Director of DSS, reports that DSS does not advertise its services.²⁷ This could potentially harm those who need services but remain unaware of the services provided as well as the process to receive them. She offers that referrals are made to them by other non-profits, but 'walk-ins' make up the majority of their clients. Those who are illiterate or speak a foreign language receive help on completing applications or receive an interpreter when needed. Meredith Downey reports that the service delivery runs smoothly although the staff is overloaded with cases, which can occasionally delay some of the benefits. Mostly, Meredith feels the Department's barriers center around lack of resources. Pertaining to community issues, Meredith reports issues with limited transportation as well as a lack of affordable housing and homeless shelters.

Most recipients of DSS services also seek and use other services in the community. Due to the demand for other services, DSS make referrals to other organizations including Vocational Rehabilitation, Division of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE), Community Service Board, Veterans Administration, and Social Security Administration. Meredith

²⁷ Interview with Meredith Downey

acknowledges relationships with other nonprofit organizations with strong collaboration including Maury River Senior Center, RARA, Free Clinic, Local Aide, and Rental Assistance. To her knowledge, she reports having good working relationships with these agencies. She feels the nonprofits that we work with have the same goals of being helpful and considerate of those that they serve. She truly feels all the nonprofits “go the extra mile.”²⁸

When asked whether one issue in the community for DSS would like to collaborate with another organization to face, Meredith answered both “housing and employment training opportunities.”²⁹ This alludes to the issue of a lack of affordable housing that she believes exists in the community. Meredith reports knowledge of a few Mountain View Terrace residents that utilize DSS services. However, much more information of the services the MVT residents use remains unknown. From Marilyn’s side, she maintains contact with Social Services eligibility workers more often than the service workers.³⁰ In order to determine rents, Marilyn must verify any income from those sources, and then they have to verify rents their clients pay so the communication occurs on both ends. Service workers serve as a quick and easy resource by being just a phone call away. Marilyn reports that when she worked out of the service workers office between 1977 and 1980, she developed an excellent working relationship with that office, and some of the same staff still work there so the relationship remains strong and easily accessible.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Interview with Marilyn Alexander

Rockbridge Area Free Clinic

The Rockbridge Area Free Clinic (RAFC) aims to serve “low-income, uninsured people throughout the Rockbridge area and to deliver quality health care.” The Rockbridge area currently has an uninsured population equal to 16 percent of the total population. Similar to all of the other non-profit agency leaders we have spoken to, Katy Datz at the Free Clinic cites limited resources as the biggest barrier to supplying health care to all of the uninsured and under-insured citizens of Rockbridge County.³¹ The RAFC only has one paid nurse practitioner, and relies almost entirely on volunteers to keep the clinic running. With more paid staff, they could cast a wider net in the community, but they are not given any state or federal funding so they cannot afford to hire any more workers. For this reason, although their desire is to help both the insured and the *underinsured*, they currently do not have the resources to aid the underinsured population. This population would be mostly comprised of Medicaid and Medicare recipients as well as those people with insurance who need help with medication costs. When the community health survey data is finished being collected, the RAFC will have a better idea of the feasibility and usefulness for the community to convert the free clinic to a “Community Health Center” where Medicare and Medicaid patients would be eligible for treatment.

On the patient side, Datz echoed other non-profit leaders in naming transportation as the biggest barrier to patients receiving treatment. She believes there may be nearly

³¹ Interview with Katy Datz

5,000 uninsured patients in the area who are not coming in for treatment, since the non-elderly uninsured population of Rockbridge County is about 15.9 percent. One tenant we interviewed could be one of those 5,000. She and her family instead visit the Health Department for some of their health care needs.³² Despite the good care she receives there, she has difficulties in finding a family physician, which is a goal she has for her and her children. Another tenant learned about the Free Clinic after his first medical bill from an injury and Emergency Room visit totaled more than \$2,000. Since then, he has been visiting the Free Clinic and reports being satisfied with its services.

The Free Clinic also offers dental care services, which one of the MVT tenants has taken full advantage of. Since Medicare does not provide dental insurance, the addition of the dental clinic in 2001 at the local Health Department was a huge step in providing total health care for the underinsured as well as the uninsured. In 2008, the Free Clinic opened its own dental clinic in the same facility as the rest of its offices and treatment facilities. For \$20, one tenant explained, they fixed several teeth, which had been affected by a fall.³³ Overall, all tenants who had been to the Free Clinic had great experiences and quickly mentioned they would head back for care before going anywhere else. All tenants interviewed acknowledged an awareness of the Free Clinic. Although one mentioned her desire to find a family physician, she seemed glad that both the Health Department and the

³² Interview with anonymous MVT tenant

³³ Ibid

Free Clinic could provide care until she can meet that goal. Advertising their services has been a huge goal for the operators of the Free Clinic, and they put up flyers all over town in restaurants and businesses. This allows everyone to be aware of their services should they require medical help from the RAFC. Particularly in comparison to some other organizations in town, the Free Clinic should be praised for their advertisement of services.

Ideas for Further Agency Research

While we are very pleased with the wide-scope of agencies we were able to interview and research, we acknowledge that the short duration of this project has left us with a few lingering agencies we would have liked to have contacted. The Health Department would have been a nice addition to our research on the Free Clinic. The Community Services Board would have been a helpful asset to determine the mental health and not just physical health of low-income individuals. Lastly, Yellow Brick Road and other subsidized childcare would have been another facet we would have been interested in exploring.

MVT Tenant Involvement

Marilyn says there is one household that has been a headache. In her words, “90 percent of the problems are caused by 10 percent of the people.”³⁴ This is likely true with any group situation. Despite the one troubled household, Marilyn seems to have a fair grasp on the affairs of the families. She said the peaceful times go in waves. Lately, a lot of

³⁴ Ibid

younger tenants have moved into MVT that do not seem to be active in the community or appear particularly cooperative. For one of the focus groups we tried to hold, no one showed up. She said, when she first took over the position at MVT, she started having support group meetings for the tenants. Everyone came, and they expressed their interest to Marilyn in having the bus service to Waddell Elementary come to MVT. Marilyn told the group it was a great idea, but that the city government needed to hear from the residents that this was something they wanted and would definitely use. She even told them she would guide them through it. After they realized that Marilyn would not do all the work and make it happen for them, everyone stopped coming to the meetings. Marilyn thinks they were intimidated and uncomfortable at the prospect of acting on behalf of themselves. There was a strong group of people who expressed to Marilyn the sentiment that the government was “not going to listen to me.” Then, there was another group that felt uncomfortable so they blamed it on being busy or forgetting. Marilyn has the general sense that when persons are asked to be involved, they generally think, “that does not mean me.” She feels this is due to self-esteem issues.

One story of hope was given to us. The tenants wanted to have a playground in the park. HUD would not provide money to build it, so Marilyn contacted the city to see if it was possible. She then had all the tenants sign a petition to ask for a playground to be built. The city manager went to bat for them, and they got a playground. Marilyn helped them get

going, but everyone participated and spoke about wanting the playground. The twenty school age residents at MVT frequent the playground when the weather permits.

Summary of Findings

Marilyn Alexander's had an initial reaction to fully engage in this project. After talking with someone else in the community who had a different experience with some students in the past, she found herself second-guessing her involvement in the process. In the end, she held to her initial reactions and had an encouraging change of heart. She told us that if the tenants have issues at MVT, she wants to know.³⁵ Marilyn said she does not care if the information gets out to the public because it needs to be brought to her attention. We felt her approach was bold and complimentary to her confidence in what she does and her willingness to be adaptable to the tenants' needs. Throughout this interviewing process, we have admired Marilyn's involvement in the community as well as her competence in her position at Mountain View Terrace. She truly goes beyond her duties as a property manager, which distinguishes MVT from many other public housing developments. Her position allows for the possibility of our recommendations to move towards further improvement.

After interviewing many of the nonprofit organizations in Lexington, we believe the nonprofits have attempted to collaborate between other organizations. However, they may

³⁵ Ibid

not be doing so as efficiently as possible. Marilyn has impressed us by her complete involvement in all aspects of the community. Her knowledge of agencies as well as the greater community serves as an exceptional resource to the MVT tenants. Tenants commented that Marilyn is not only friendly and approachable, but also a strong responsible and connected member of the community. Although tenants at MVT are vaguely aware of the services available in the community, they are not being utilized to the extent they could be.

Recommendations for the MVT and other Agencies

We think MVT can improve the efficiency and depth of information that Marilyn provides to their tenants. We propose a brochure given to the tenants when they move into MVT and on a regular basis that summarizes the services and organizations that are available to them in Lexington. The brochure would simply identify the main resources that the tenants need (i.e. Free Clinic, Campus Kitchen, RARA, and transportation), provide a brief explanation of the service and direct contact information. The community appears to have a need for community collaboration as evidenced by of all the agencies they report working with. As a collaborative effort, a website that combines all of the agencies available would be an extremely useful resource, and could perhaps even be a part of the existing Lexington City website. A user-friendly interface would increase the likelihood of people using the website. With the commonality of smart phones as well as Internet at the local library, we feel all tenants could utilize this site even if they do not have Internet

access of their own. Marilyn also notes that she believes the majority of tenants do have some sort of Internet access.³⁶

Marilyn also mentioned that the Washington and Lee's Journalism Department run the information station on local cable. This channel is available to anyone with cable television, and Marilyn sometimes advertises for MVT on this channel when she has vacancies. A simple message as outlined above for the brochure of services may also be effective on this channel. We fully believe the information should be conveyed in the simplest way to reach the broadest audience possible. This way, when a citizen of Lexington has a problem, they have several ways to learn more about the services available to them.

Lastly, we believe that tenants could really benefit from occasional meetings organized by Marilyn and attended by a few local non-profit leaders each time. These meetings would introduce tenants to local services and local leaders, thereby taking some of the fear or hesitation to contact the organization. Tenants would be given more information on the eligibility for different services, and what must be done to utilize the service. We think that an organization like Campus Kitchens would be a great test run for these types of meeting. Jenny Davidson is very friendly and approachable, and meal service requires little effort to begin. The application process only requires tenants to inform Marilyn they wish to begin the service. This would therefore be a great first step in

³⁶ Ibid

increasing involvement and breaking the ice for utilizing local services. We do realize, however, that there would need to be an incentive that would make tenants want to attend, and look forward to speaking with Marilyn to see what incentive she thinks could work.

Additionally, a large push towards complete community collaboration has yet to be achieved. The organizations work well with one another, but they seem to effectively provide their own services but fall slightly short of consistently providing information to their clients about other services. Each organization keeps largely to itself with the services it provides. The organizations could also do more by giving referrals of clients to the other nonprofits outside of simply referring for health needs, which appears to be the current extent of referrals to agencies. Our previous recommendation as well as full commitment to community collaboration among organizations would mitigate barriers to services for low-income individuals and families in Lexington and other rural communities.

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