

July 10, 2008

Editorial Office
The Atlantic
The Watergate
600 New Hampshire Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20037

RE: “American Murder Mystery”

Dear Editorial Staff:

In “American Murder Mystery” (*Atlantic Magazine*, July/August 2008), Hanna Rosin argues that recent public housing revitalization efforts have had severe unintended consequences, chiefly crime migrating from the urban core to outlying neighborhoods. Drawing sweeping conclusions from limited data on a single public housing redevelopment in Memphis, she indicts the federal HOPE VI public housing revitalization program as a failed anti-poverty effort. In making her case, Rosin glosses over the broad-based policy judgment that the status quo in troubled public housing projects was unacceptable—concentrated poverty; rampant crime and drug-dealing; multigenerational dependence; isolation from the economic mainstream; and inferior educational opportunities. Before the bold experiment with HOPE VI, the worst of “the projects” were considered unlivable, dangerous worlds unto themselves—and irremediably flawed.

As the largest nonprofit developer in the HOPE VI program, Community Builders has had substantial experience with the day-to-day realities of transforming 15 distressed public housing projects into new, mixed-income communities in 13 cities. We’ve found that offering attractive, affordable homes coupled with targeted supports to interested residents through a network of local stakeholders can produce remarkable results for both places and people.

For instance, in Louisville, another city where Rosin finds migrating crime, the HOPE VI development known as Park DuValle has led to a dramatic turnaround in the surrounding community. In addition to replacing the badly-deteriorated public housing with a mix of over 1,000 award-winning, affordable rental units and single-family homes, the immediate neighborhood has realized over \$130 million in additional public and private investments in local schools, police and fire stations, parks, a recreation center, and a new community health center. A University of Louisville study found that housing values in



The **Community Builders, Inc.**

95 Berkeley Street, Suite 500
Boston, MA 02116-6240

617 695-9595

main fax 857 221-8618

asset management fax 857 221-8770

development / finance / legal fax 857 221-8618

property management fax 857 221-8680

accounting fax 857 221-8615

personnel fax 857 221-8619

TDD 800 545-1833 x183

www.tcbinc.org

Boston

Albany Chicago

Cincinnati Indianapolis

Louisville New Haven

Norfolk, VA Pittsburgh

Springfield, MA Washington, DC

Patrick E. Clancy

President & Chief Executive Officer

the Park DuValle development and surrounding community increased by 240 percent between 2000 and 2006. Thanks to HOPE VI, a long-stagnant section of west Louisville with a poverty rate that once approached 80 percent is now a thriving real estate market with higher employment, much lower crime—and enormous community pride.

Helping public housing residents access these opportunities requires a sustained effort of the HOPE VI developer and local providers. They know best how to help under-employed adults increase their earnings, access health care, and get their kids into decent schools and safe, nurturing pre- and after-school programs. To date, with its local partners, Community Builders has assisted over 5,000 residents succeed in such transitions by offering housing counseling, helping them secure over 2,000 job placements and \$17 million in Earned Income Tax Credit benefits, supporting local school improvement efforts and youth development programs, and facilitating community events and activities—including a community jazz festival at our Park DuValle site. What can't yet be adequately quantified are the expanding community ties and social capital among families with a range of incomes and cultural experiences in new HOPE VI developments. But dozens of cities across the country that have undertaken HOPE VI initiatives can point to similar tangible and intangible results.

Rosin correctly points out that tackling the multiple challenges of concentrated poverty, multigenerational disadvantage, and urban crime is no simple matter. Some unintended consequences are unavoidable. They must be met with well-considered policy responses that will take time to show clear benefits and costs. A recent convening of the U.S. Conference of Mayors strongly called for more HOPE VI funding. Apparently decision-makers closest to the realities of failed public housing believe that transforming these projects into new mixed-income communities does far more good than harm—and surely offers more hope to residents than what came before.

Sincerely,

Patrick E. Clancy

Patrick E. Clancy
President & CEO