



Detroit Housing Commission. Bringing Motown's mixed-income families together to create healthy communities

At a Glance

Location:

Pontiac, MI

Founded:

1908

Employees:

85-90

Specialty:

Educational, healthcare, institutional, and municipal construction

Average Sales:

\$150 million

Average Projects:

100-150

THERE WAS A TIME when thriving and innovative companies made Detroit one of the world's top cities. Things are different now. In 2008, the *Detroit Free Press* named its hometown among the poorest large cities in the nation, with 33.8 percent of the population living below the federal poverty threshold. The automotive crisis and the recession have made a bad situation worse. In January 2010, the Department of Labor reported unemployment at 15.3 percent, but the *Detroit News* claims part-time workers seeking full-time work bring the real total closer to 50 percent. Clearly, the Motor City needs help.

Eugene E. Jones Jr. serves as executive director for the Detroit Housing Commission (DHC). His group is the largest public-housing agency in Michigan and serves a metro area of more than four million people. Once owned and operated as a city department, DHC severed those ties in 2004 to function as a separate municipal body. Now, the agency owns 4,000 public-housing units, awards 6,000 housing choice (Section 8) vouchers, and is redeveloping three obsolete public sites. Jones believes his work at DHC is helping revitalize a city in need of change. "When you improve one area, you

change more than just a community," he explains. "By rebuilding, you affect the surrounding neighborhoods."

Theories continue to evolve regarding public-housing projects, and Jones admits his board of directors continues to learn through experience. Their first development, Parkside, occurred in the early 1990s. Then, DHC was committed to higher quality and less-dense housing that appear to be market-rate units. Now, the agency is more focused on mixed-income properties that offer several advantages. "By putting market-rate units and low-income public housing in the same developments, we increase the diversity and quality of life for people in Detroit," Jones explains. "We're giving people mentors and opportunities, and encouraging healthy interaction."

Various DHC programs serve individuals who earn between 0 and 30 percent of the area median income. While traditional and outdated public-housing developments were characterized by crime, loiterers, and graffiti, modern mixed-income units are safe, welcoming, and clean. "People talk and live their lives together," Jones says. "Safety is not just created through

flooding an area with police officers but by working with the city and police force and residents.” When DHC helps people find housing, it instills citizens with pride. Tenants and owners respond by maintaining their property and reporting crime.

New developments also attract schools and commercial developers who join DHC’s revitalization efforts. “We receive money from the city for

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EUGENE E. JONES JR., EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

infrastructure so we can develop these areas,” Jones says. “We’re increasing property value, helping small businesses, bringing public transportation, and providing home-ownership opportunities. Everyone wins.” Although businesses, owners, and developers might hesitate to invest in a troubled state, Jones says they won’t get a better deal anywhere else.

One DHC development, Woodbridge Estates, replaced the infamous Jeffries Homes in Midtown. Opened in 1953, the Jeffries projects housed eight 14-story buildings known as a regional drug mecca. DHC and Scripps Park Associates (the developer) have replaced Jeffries West with Woodbridge, an attractive collection of townhomes, single-family homes, and multifamily properties. “People who look at our latest developments never know they are or were public-housing units, and that fact changes the whole outlook of a community,” Jones says. What was once a self-contained, row-house public site was transformed into a mixed-income neighborhood that remains connected to its surroundings. DHC is also developing Jeffries East, the area across the freeway, as Cornerstone Development. There, 180 mixed-income rentals will replace 260 units.

Jones and his colleagues keep busy throughout the entire metro area. Another development, Gardenview Estates, boasts 800 mixed units, a Boys and Girls Club, and a community center. DHC is lining up financing for a 180-unit property on the east side and received \$18 million in stimulus funds to renovate 400 vacant homes. With its energetic board of directors, many resources, and large staff, the Detroit Housing Commission is working hard to help the city of Detroit rediscover its greatness. —Zach Baliva



The Detroit Housing Commission’s Gardenview Estates project is being built in three phases, seen in the master plan (above). The development includes a mixture of townhomes, duplex apartments, and multi-unit apartment buildings paired with park space, courtyards (opposite page) and a community center. Photos: Kadushin Associates Architects Planners.