

# Philadelphia's Story

## Turning around public housing

by Nancy Pekala

These are exciting and changing times for public housing authorities. Gone are the old ideas of public housing so prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. The successful management of public housing today requires strong leadership and the willingness to become actively involved in the community. Perhaps no one has been more instrumental in helping to increase the quality of life of their public housing authority tenants than Carl Greene, CPM®, executive director of the Philadelphia Housing Authority.

Recently, the *Journal of Property Management* caught up with Greene to discuss the state of public housing authorities and how he has successfully implemented change.

**JPM®:** *Are residents of public housing authorities better off today than a decade ago?*

**Greene:** They are way better off today. Back then we were focusing on maintaining physically distressed properties. We couldn't demolish them, and we could not rebuild. The idea was to maintain the existing structures as best you can.

**JPM:** *What prompted you to enter this sector?*



Carl Greene, CPM



Martin Luther King, Jr. Plaza, 770 S. 13th Street

All images Philadelphia Housing Authority

**Greene:** Need. When I came to Philadelphia, I saw a great sense of need. My plan was to come in, apply the basic principles of property management I've learned through all my training to become a CPM Member. We've gone through all the fundamentals of property management and we've applied those principles. I saw the people who served before me failed, and I felt I could contribute in a significant way to the quality of life for other people.

**JPM:** *To what do you attribute your success?*

**Greene:** I have a passion. I lived in public housing, and I've seen bad management from the inside out. I know if you're at the top of this organization you have to be

concerned about every child, every man and every woman who lives in these homes. You have to make the employees and systems you have responsibility for serve the customers. And you have to do that in an economical, efficient and effective way that mimics the best practices of the private sector.

**JPM:** *What is the most challenging part of managing a housing authority?*

**Greene:** The biggest challenge is the competing regulatory and oversight agencies with which you have to deal. The federal government provides our funds and makes the rules, the state sets up our governance system and charters us, but the mayor of the city appoints our board. I like to say,

we're federally-funded, state-chartered and locally-bossed. All three are in a position to deny blame for things that go wrong, but all three want to take credit when things go well.

**JPM:** *What do you like best about your job?*

**Greene:** I like outcomes. I like to see people's quality of life improved dramatically, in a short period of time. I want to

executive directors are allowed to stay on for a number of years, dramatic progress can be made. In fact, we've seen that kind of turnaround in city after city where there's been stable leadership. We're serving as conduits between the state housing finance agency, the federal government, the city government and private-sector developers. We're the hub that takes all these resources and converts them into quality affordable public housing.

**Greene:** Continued deregulation will help. We also need continued professionalism at the top. Training and development of staff is critical.

**JPM:** *From a management perspective, will changes in this sector mean more or different opportunities for real estate professionals?*

**Greene:** There will be more opportunities, especially as we continue to



Raymond Rosen Apartments, 2110 N. 23rd Street



Abbotsford Homes, 3226 McMichael Street

see quick results, and that's what we've done in Philadelphia. I also like being in the real estate profession. I like the comfort of knowing I'm in one of the world's leading professions providing a first-rate service to people who are very much in need.

**JPM:** *What is your assessment of public housing authorities today?*

**Greene:** Public housing authorities have undergone a lot of scrutiny over the last decade. We've had constant pressure from HUD, the press, the inspector general and various other organizations. What that pressure has done for us is make public housing authorities better managed and more responsive organizations. When

**JPM:** *In many of its programs, the PHA stresses tenant empowerment and self-sufficiency. How do you go about achieving this goal?*

**Greene:** The first thing you have to do is operate a responsible agency so when you make rules you can require people to follow those rules. Second, you enforce the rules. Third, you say to people we're offering you an opportunity for job training programs and social uplift programs. You give them the tools to make a living wage and benefits and to have portability of skills.

**JPM:** *What needs to be done to make more significant changes in public housing?*

professionalize and bring CERTIFIED PROPERTY MANAGER® Members into housing authorities and adopt private sector standards. We're also going to continue to form public-private partnerships where we have ACCREDITED MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION® firms overseeing public housing on behalf of housing authorities and HUD. As we continue to create high quality, contemporarily-designed and -built communities, we'll be able to attract the best property management companies to come in and manage these developments. □

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