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IN MIXED-INCOME COMMUNITIES

BY ALEXANDRA CURLEY AND NEIL MCCULLAGH

BOSTON'S Columbia Point was a notorious failed housing project, and was one of the nation's first public housing developments to be converted into a privately managed, mixed-income community. What was once known as Columbia Point is now Harbor Point, a 1,283-unit mixed-income community.

This article illustrates a collaborative, quality of life-centered practice developed by the management team, which

has demonstrably contributed to improving residents' lives at Harbor Point.

Challenge

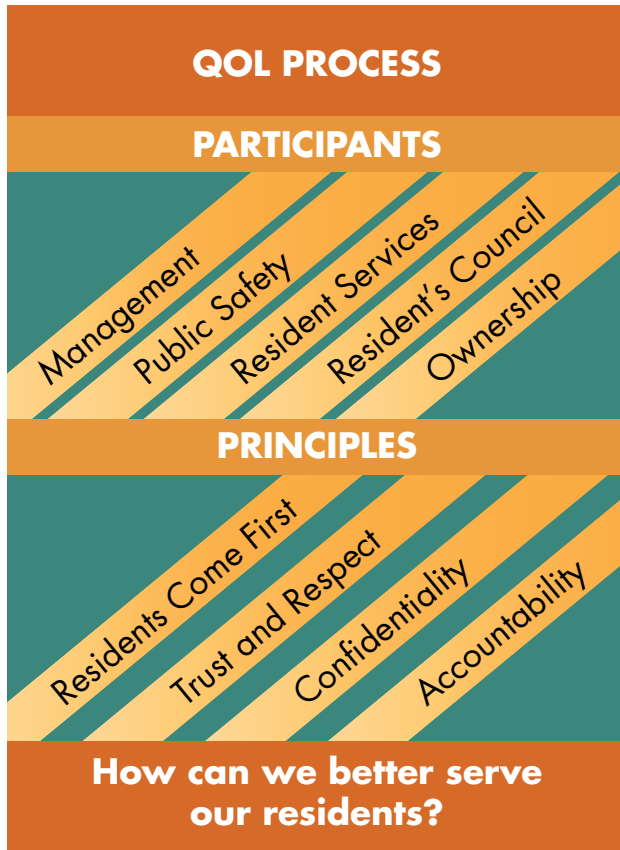
By 2006, Harbor Point had stabilized as a community that provided outstanding housing, but the management team realized that satisfying demand for supportive services remained an elusive goal. The Harbor Point Community Task Force and the Management Company together understood that by focusing intently on the risk fac-

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tors that are characteristic of many low-income families, the response to residents' needs would strengthen the quality of life for the whole community.

What emerged from this realization was the beginning of a new management approach for the community—"Quality of Life" (QOL) Meetings. This practice began as a simple meeting of a core group of property management staff, but eventually grew into a structured collaboration between onsite stakeholders and partners.

MIXED-INCOME HOUSING as a solution to poverty concentration has been a government-supported practice across the US, Canada, Europe and Australia for the last 20 years. The successes and challenges of mixed-income housing are well-documented, with best practices detailing the benefits of construction and design, sound financing, integrated units and resident services. However, management of these communities typically falls into standard practice areas, which create long-term challenges in sustaining housing and valuable resident services.

Less has been shared about management practices and the level of coordination required for sustaining mixed-income communities. In order to preserve affordable housing, strengthen residential services and build healthy, diverse communities, a specific focus on management practices and increased levels of coordination is critical.

Harbor Point in Boston Massachusetts maintains a rigorous **Quality of Life (QOL)** management process, which is a uniquely collaborative and resident-focused process that contributes to the safety, health and operation of the community. It is a closely coordinated effort between residents, management and multiple partner organizations that cooperate to maintain the 1,283-unit property.

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QOL Case Study

The case of Liz Talcott demonstrates how QOL meetings support residents with mental health issues and prevent unnecessary evictions. Ms. Talcott is a single woman in her 60's who has lived at Harbor Point for 16 years. At one of the early QOL meetings, the Harbor Point ownership learned that she was being considered for an eviction process because she owed a sum related to a maintenance fine three years prior. She had made no attempts to repay the fine, and she did not appear for any of her five eviction court dates. As a result, management pursued and was granted an eviction. With a moving truck scheduled to arrive, the QOL partners met and to their own surprise no one knew why she had not paid the fine; the underlying reason for the eviction. None of the QOL partners had spoken directly with Ms. Talcott. Although Ms. Talcott suffered from a mental illness and is one of a small number of Department of Mental Health (DMH) tenants, management and partners proceeded without further exploring the circumstances behind the potential eviction. Further, other than her failure to pay for the maintenance charges, Ms. Talcott had been a good resident.

In this early case, the QOL meeting served its most basic purpose—ensuring that the most vulnerable residents' needs are served. While this late-hour work averted a mistake, the QOL Meeting process endeavors to identify and respond to residents' needs long before an eviction proceeding.

Through the QOL process, partners learned a great deal from Ms. Talcott's case, and they developed a rigorous system for providing extra support and check-ins to DMH tenants. Resident Services was charged with connecting with the DMH caseworkers who serve Harbor Point tenants and conducting check-ins with all DMH tenants on a monthly basis. Now, the status of these check-ins is reported and discussed at QOL meetings to identify anyone who may need extra support and prevent them from falling through the cracks and facing eviction. As a result of the QOL process, Ms. Talcott continues to live at Harbor Point along with other DMH tenants who receive the regular support they need to maintain their housing stability.

and partners to priorities of the community, but from the perspective of residents' needs, rather than the "silo-ed" considerations of any single stakeholder (e.g., security or leasing). While each meeting provides participants the opportunity to communicate their interests related to the management of the community, the overriding purpose is to focus on residents' needs.

Principles for QOL Meetings

The goal of each QOL meeting is to identify resident needs that can be better served through a more coordinated response. The underlying idea is that by attending to the highest priority needs, there is a marginal but continuous contribution to strengthening the community.

Resident-centered—QOL is rooted in residents' needs. QOL partners are reminded that the purpose of the meeting is to collectively prepare and respond to specific needs of specific residents, and to prioritize those needs within the context of the broader community.

Trust and respect—The most challenging part of the QOL process is navigating compromise, especially if solutions contradict established processes or individual department agendas. This level of discourse requires an environment of trust and respect where solutions can be negotiated quickly and amicably.

Confidentiality—Information discussed at QOL is confidential. QOL participants share personal viewpoints and perspectives on sensitive issues. When new individuals enter the QOL meetings, they are welcomed into the QOL "circle of trust." As one QOL partner said: "We tell them that the bar for trust is 100%."

Quality-of-Life (QOL) Process

QOL is the manifestation of the Harbor Point Apartment Company's recognition that some residents require more help than others and that making those residents a priority is essential to

building a safe, diverse mixed-income community. QOL is similar to interdisciplinary practices in other fields such as coordinated health care, which holds regularly scheduled interdisciplinary staff meetings to review individual patient-care plans.

Monthly meetings orient staff

Participants in Quality of Life Meetings

Partner	Role
Resident Services	<p>Daily Responsibilities: Provide onsite support services to residents. Identify and assist at-risk residents, conduct regular check-ins, collaborate with Department of Mental Health. Respond to resident needs. Provide updates on all tenant check-ins. Conduct unit inspections. Assist with all lease compliance concerns that ensure successful tenancy.</p> <p>Role in QOL Meetings: Serve as resident advocate. Provide firsthand accounts of circumstances in residents' lives. Lead discussions related to families' circumstances that might suggest mitigation outside of the eviction process. Identify families at risk.</p>
Community Task Force	<p>Daily Responsibilities: Resident representative and owner. Provide policy direction and make procurement decisions. Share any tenant concerns or other problems in community. Govern the management of the property.</p> <p>Role in QOL Meetings: Serve as resident advocate and community advocate. Establish resident expectations for desired outcomes. Identify families at risk.</p>
Management	<p>Daily Responsibilities: Manage property: Rent subsidized units, ensure lease compliance. Respond to repair requests. Maintain property curb appeal. Protect the capital assets.</p> <p>Role in QOL Meetings: Report residents who are not lease compliant or are in clear violation of property rules. Offer strategies for resolving problems. Identify families at risk.</p>
Ownership	<p>Daily Responsibilities: Maintain capital asset, hire and manage contractors, strong coordination with Community Task Force. Co-govern management operations of the property.</p> <p>Role in QOL Meetings: Meeting facilitator, ensure all procedures are followed, facilitate agreements between partners, and mediate divergent opinions between QOL participants.</p>
Public Safety	<p>Daily Responsibilities: Maintain standards of safety and social order: Provide 24-hour onsite security. Respond quickly to management and residents' requests.</p> <p>Role in QOL Meetings: Provide insight specifically related to crime related incidents on property. Identify families at risk.</p>
Leasing	<p>Daily Responsibilities: Lease market-rate units. Revise marketing plans as necessary to maintain high occupancy. Identify capital improvements to enhance market value.</p> <p>Role in QOL Meetings: Provide input on impacts on leasing market units.</p>
Maintenance	<p>Daily Responsibilities: Maintain property. Respond to maintenance requests. Update systems.</p> <p>Role in QOL Meetings: Advise participants of community and or resident maintenance needs that evidence a programmatic response of extra support. Identify families at risk.</p>

Accountability—QOL meetings institutionalize accountability across departments by formalizing communication. Meeting regularly requires QOL partners to rectify issues quickly and report back to the team, which strengthens the team and reinforces accountability.

Coordinating Quality of Life Meetings

QOL meetings are largely driven by three lists of priority groups: 1) residents affiliated with the Department of Mental Health, 2) residents in need of more intensive

supportive services, 3) tenants and visitors who present a security risk.

The first list is generated by Resident Services and consists of tenants who are Department of Mental Health (DMH) clients. Resident Services is charged with identifying DMH residents, con-

QOL Case Study

Lucille, a long-term resident who raised her four children at Harbor Point, began having housekeeping issues due to her declining health at age 73. Management brought the case to the QOL meeting after observing major issues during her annual unit inspection that put her housing at risk. Resident Services worked with Lucille for a year to get assistance with housekeeping, and continued to make regular check-ins with her to ensure she maintained her apartment. Management also conducted follow-up unit inspections, and during one of these visits, staff discovered Lucille had an unauthorized occupant. The occupant was her 35 year-old son, who was trying to help his mom keep her housing by providing assistance she needed as her health failed. Her son was not on the lease because he would not pass Harbor Point's criminal background check requirement. QOL partners knew that Lucille's son had turned his life around and they knew that Lucille needed her son so she could "age in place." QOL partners decided that Resident Services should help Lucille's son apply to be a caregiver. With "caregiver" status, he would not be able to take over the lease when his mother passed away. His application to be a caregiver was declined, but Resident Services successfully helped him appeal that decision. As a result of this unique arrangement, Lucille was able to live her final years peacefully at Harbor Point with her son's assistance.

In the absence of the QOL Meeting process, a less-flexible and favorable, but more cumbersome and time-consuming resolution would have likely unfolded.

necting with their DMH caseworkers on a regular basis and conducting monthly (or sometimes weekly or even daily) home visits to check in with the residents. By staying closely involved with tenants with mental illness, the Resident Services team is able to assist with delicate situations (e.g., when tenants go off of their medications or have episodes of behaving erratically), and ultimately prevent these tenants from slipping through the cracks.

Resident Services also generates the second list of tenants: residents who have challenges and may be in need of intensive services. These include tenants with physi-

cal or mental health problems (who are not affiliated with DMH); elderly residents who are homebound, isolated, and/or showing signs of dementia; tenants who are not lease compliant due to housekeeping issues or rent arrears; residents who are having disturbing domestic problems; and those who are having difficulties with their children.

The third list is developed collaboratively by Security and other QOL partners, and includes tenants and/or people who are visiting the property that threaten safety and social order. This includes high-risk youth, those who have been issued "no tres-

pass" orders but who are known or suspected of entering the property, and teenagers and young adults who have been identified as gang members or at risk of being recruited by local gangs.

Promising Practices: Strategies for Successful Collaboration

One primary value of QOL is that it allows issues to be resolved before advancing. For example, QOL gives Resident Services an opportunity to advocate for residents who may be at risk of eviction *before* the tenant has a "pre-termination" meeting with Management (this is one of several preliminary steps in the eviction process). QOL provides a forum to discuss cases in the presence of partners who may have insights important to the needs of the household.

Management now reports to the QOL partners the names of any tenants who have not followed through with their recertification process, an annual income verification process that is required by HUD. Resident Services staff reach out to these households immediately in order to inquire if there is any problem. Some tenants may fail to recertify because their household income has increased and they do not want to report it. If they wait six months until recertifying, they will be required to pay management for the back rent at their higher income, a result that frequently leads to eviction. Many similar issues with high potential to become complicated and expensive are avoided by Resident Services contacting tenants as

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soon as they miss their first recertification meeting with Management.

Housekeeping

Housekeeping issues are the topic of many QOL discussions that require collaboration and persistence among the QOL team. Housekeeping issues are often first brought to the attention of Management during their annual unit inspections. Maintenance, Resident Services, Leasing, and Security also report housekeeping issues to QOL partners when they encounter them. Some tenants, particularly those with mental health or mobility issues, have difficulty keeping their units up to standard; some have neglected

cleaning their units to the point of disrepair (e.g. leaks, fires, infestation), and some exhibit extreme cases of hoarding. Partners discuss these tenant issues at QOL meetings, and Resident Services makes a schedule to meet with the tenants and provide the necessary counseling, tools, and support to assist residents in gaining control of their housekeeping. These residents are kept on Resident Services' 'housekeeping list,' and Resident Services provides QOL partners with an update each month on progress made. When the tenant has made significant progress over a period of time, Resident Services reduces the number of check-in visits, but continues to check in periodically to

ensure they do not revert to old habits and fall through the cracks.

Gang Activity

QOL meetings also provide the space for partners to work together to address gang and drug-related issues. At the QOL meetings, partners share information and keep each other alert of any new evidence about youth who are known or suspected of being involved with gangs, former tenants who are known gang members, other known criminals, and 'trespassed' visitors and former tenants that have appeared on or around the property. One strategy used by QOL partners to minimize gang involvement is to encourage all Harbor Point employees to



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learn the names and faces of teenagers and young adults. At Harbor Point there are over 200 youth of all ages 14-25. Though it is a challenging task, QOL partners are encouraged to make eye contact with them and call them by their names (if known) when they see them on the property. This process acknowledges the youth as members of the community, helps reduce the youth's ability to remain anonymous and thus hopefully helps to increase accountability. It also establishes a point of connection that often leads to break-through conversations, large and small, about employment, training or schooling opportunities.

In recent years, the QOL process has helped address local gang involvement and recruitment activity among some teenagers and young adults at Harbor Point. Security and other QOL partners worked together to investigate the problem, and their inquiry led to a series of YouTube videos showing local youth involved in gang recruitment activities. The videos were then shown at the QOL meeting to make all partners aware of these activities and the individuals involved. From these videos, the partners printed close-up photos of the actors and worked together to identify the individuals by sharing photos, names, and other relevant information. When they identified resident youth in this ongoing process, Resident Services staff visited the households of the individuals to inform the parent(s) of the evidence of gang activity and met with the youth to offer services and advice to try to steer them away from gangs.

Implementing QOL On Your Site

In the words of one partner, "the QOL process is about being thoughtful and predictive, and it has taken a lot of work to get to the point where we are proactive instead of reactive." The Harbor Point QOL process continues to improve and adapt as the management organization has reinforced the kind of collaboration required to make it work. The process is institutionalized and has grown in value as partners increasingly view it as the most effective way to respond to community challenges. Since QOL began six years ago, management reports a dra-

matic improvement in the resolution of issues relating to resident needs and outstanding community problems. An ancillary benefit has been the reported improvement in the relations between departments.

Despite well-designed housing and strong property management practices, the continued challenge to serve residents with multiple complex problems demands that housing operators establish practices that are responsive to specific resident needs. The lessons learned by Harbor Point help advance a model for communities that reinforces diversity, preserves affordable housing and maintains the highest possible standards for subsidized housing. Mixed-income communities continue to be implemented around the globe to address the failures of concentrated subsidized housing. The Quality of Life process outlined here provides one more tool that helps housing operators build value and continuously improve quality of life for residents in these communities.

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