

EXCLUSIVE: Turning Avondale into neighborhood of choice

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The Alameda apartment building on Reading Rd. in Avondale a building that is run by The Community Builders. It is the nonprofit remaking housing in the neighborhood with a \$30 million HUD grant. Already, more than 200 households are receiving services from Community Builders through the Urban League. / The Enquirer/ Tony Jones

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STEERING COMMITTEE

The Community Builders on Tuesday will announce members of the Avondale Choice Neighborhoods Implementation Grant steering committee that will establish grant priorities.

Patricia Milton, president, Avondale Community Council, is committee chair.

Other members are: Victoria Ames, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center Rev. Robert Baines, pastor of Avondale's Southern Baptist Church Russell Hairston, city of Cincinnati Department of Trade and Development Patrick Duhaney, Local Initiatives Support Corp. Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky Capt. Michael Neville, Cincinnati Police Department District 4 Michelle Taylor, an Avondale resident.

Ex-officio committee members:

Donna Jones Baker, president and chief executive, the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati Terri Hamilton Brown, The Community Builders Ozie Davis, executive director, Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp. Eileen Cooper Reed, president, Cincinnati Public Schools board

AVONDALE — To Nicole Officer, Avondale is already her neighborhood of choice.

The formerly homeless, 40-year-old single mother who lives with her three youngest sons in the Alameda Apartments is in the right place at the right time to achieve her goal of climbing out of poverty.

"I've really messed it up," she said.

Yet help now surrounds her. Hers is one of nine low- and mixed-income apartment buildings in the Reading Road corridor between Blair Avenue and Fred Shuttlesworth Circle that a nonprofit developer will restore or rebuild in the next five years. More importantly, as a building resident, she and every member of her household are eligible for social services provided and coordinated by the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati.

Today, that developer, Boston-based the Community Builders, recipient in December of a \$29.5 million federal Choice Neighborhoods grant, will announce its \$1.2 million services contract with the Urban

League and the members of the Avondale Choice steering committee.

In other words, after months of preparation, grant money is starting to flow.

Emphasis on safety, education and wellness

Already, 279 people from 140 target households are engaged with comprehensive case managers and other specific services – job readiness and placement, financial literacy, health and wellness, safety and education – aimed at helping them improve their lives by reaching self-sufficiency and, ultimately, lift the entire community.

“All we’re trying to do is be a good partner with the people of Avondale and all of our partners who are already working together in Avondale,” Bart Mitchell, Community Builders president and chief executive, said Saturday at the 10th annual Avondale Health Fair, which marked the developer’s formal public introduction.

Still, a lot has happened privately since the December property purchase and grant announcement. Representatives from Community Builders, Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp. and Urban League have been going door to door to engage residents. The developer has emphasized safety and cleanliness in the buildings, even before renovation begins, fixing broken locks, installing window screens and offering incentives for residents to maintain their apartments.

Taking the obstacles away from employment

Officer, who moved from a market-rate Kennedy Heights apartment in December to the Alameda, completed the Urban League’s Accelerated Call Center Education Program in July and landed a job at Citibank’s credit card operations center in Florence, 17 miles away.

“I don’t have a car, I was overwhelmed, I had to quit,” Officer said. Her youngest son is 13 months, another son is 6 years old and starting first grade.

Urban League social workers will connect with Officer this week and help her find another job closer to home. Another option is additional education at Per Scholas, a New York-based information technology-training service that will open later this month in the LBD Business Center just down the street at Reading Road and Rockdale Avenue. Officer had completed some IT courses at the University of Cincinnati.

In the meantime, Officer has applied to become a Community Builders building monitor, which would pay \$200 a month.

“I’m not going to give up,” she said.

While she and case managers work on her employment, conditions in her building are improved. It is cleaner since Community Buildings bought it, she said. Groups of unruly teens no longer congregate outside her door. A maintenance worker will drop off new screens this week so she will be able to open windows. She has had to keep storm windows down because, she said, “the flies just come right in.”

Improvements must be tangible and sustainable

Besides the Alameda, the other target buildings are Somerset Manor at Blair and Reading, the Maple, the Poinciana at Hutchins Avenue and Reading, and Crescent Court at South Fred Shuttlesworth Circle and Reading – which, in total, contain 318 units.

Selection of the Avondale Choice steering committee, headed by Avondale Community Council President Patricia Milton, is another important step forward that satisfies an element of the grant proposal.

“The community is responsible for making sure the grant is implemented to the benefit of the community,” Milton said. “We want to make sure tangible, sustainable things are done that benefit people’s lives.”

All projects within the grant must be approved by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Avondale leaders and agencies have a wish list of projects that could come out of a \$4 million community improvements pool. Among them would be creation of market-rate housing on Burnet Avenue that could attract people who work at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center and other Uptown businesses.

Some Avondale community leaders would like to raze the 30-year-old Avondale Town Center and rebuild it on street grade at the corner of Reading and Forest Avenue. Ideally, the new town center would include a full-service grocery store, which would be a first in Avondale since an IGA closed in November 2008, as well as mixed-income housing above. That project would require additional money to complete.

One project that appears to be moving forward is the move of the Avondale Community Council and its Avondale Youth Council into the former Golden Age Nursing Home at 3635 Reading, across the street from Hirsch Recreation Center. The community council bought the vacant building for \$10,000 in May 2012 and plans to rent classroom space to both the Urban League and The Community Builders as a revenue generator.

Following the Reds Community Fund/Procter & Gamble makeover last week of Hirsch baseball fields and the neighboring Gabriel’s Place food ministry, signs of physical change are increasing in Avondale. Harder to see is the human development.

“With the Choice launch and the success ... in enrolling residents in case management, the entire project is ready to gain momentum,” said Ozie Davis, executive director of the Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp.

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