

SAVING AVONDALE: New landlord offers housing – and hope

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about AVONDALE

- Population: 12,466 (89.1 percent African-American)
- Median household income: \$18,071*
- Housing units: 7,498 (1,902 vacant, 25.4 percent)
- Households led by women with children: 1,128 (20.2 percent)
- Population under age 18: 3,219 (25.8 percent of neighborhood)
- Children eligible for free/reduced-price school meals: 92.3 percent**
- Childhood overweight/obesity: 29.1 percent
- Infant mortality: (death before 1 year): 17.5 per 1,000 live births***

Sources: 2010 Census, Cincinnati Neighborhood Market Drill Down, Cincinnati Health Department, Ohio Department of Education, Cincinnati Public Schools, Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Community Building Institute;
*2007, adjusted for 2010 dollars, **2009-2010, ***2007-2009

AVONDALE — The redevelopment of hundreds of affordable housing units in Avondale has not started, but the nonprofit developer leading that charge is already helping residents improve their lives.

Tiffany Chapel is an example. The 38-year-old divorced, unemployed mother of five sons moved from Westwood into Crescent Court apartments in October. In January, Deborah Love, resident outreach worker with new landlord The Community Builders, knocked on Chapel's door, struck up a conversation, gleaned Chapel's interest in a nursing career and connected her to Mercy Neighborhood Ministries.

By early May, Chapel had completed an 85-hour home care aide training program and was just hired for a job with another agency.

“Almost overnight I was able to change my career from waitress and housecleaner to something with a better future,” Chapel said. “What’s happening is (Community Builders) is helping people see options beside the lifestyle they think they’re stuck in.”

Behind-the-scenes groundwork has taken place in the five months since The Community Builders won one of four national Choice Neighborhood grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development – not least of which is personal contact with residents impossible before the sale and grant receipt.

The \$29.5 million grant will, in part, focus on those five distressed properties on Reading Road and provide social services to residents of the buildings. The HUD grant will be used to attract more public and private investment to Avondale, seek to upgrade the Avondale Town Center at Reading and Forest Avenue and add muscle to efforts by the Avondale-based Center for Closing the Health Gap to bring in additional retail and return a full-service grocery to Avondale for the first time since 2008.

- Map: [Housing targeted for renovation](#)

The Enquirer has documented the neighborhood's changes and challenges since March 2012 in its series “Saving Avondale.” Some of that work was included in the HUD grant application.

“Our message to the residents in those five buildings is, ‘You are the change,’ ” said Ozie Davis, executive director of the Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp.

The Community Builders already owns seven apartment buildings in Avondale, including the five that are the focal point of the Choice Neighborhoods money. The developer has submitted a grant application for low-income tax credits to acquire four more vacant apartment buildings and the vacant lot at the corner of Maple and Reading. The

developer already has a purchase option on the two empty Maple Avenue buildings.

“These vacant buildings could be done first and provide temporary housing when we get to the first wave of the five core buildings,” said Jeff Beam, senior project manager for Community Builders in Avondale.

Word will come in June if Community Builders wins the tax credits from the Ohio Housing Finance Agency to acquire two buildings on Maple Avenue, 610 and 615 – which are next to and across the street from one of its five core buildings, The Maple, at 631 Maple.

The other two vacant apartment buildings on the developer’s wish list are the Commodore at 3639 Reading and the Ambassador around the corner at 722 Gholson Ave. Those two buildings are less than two blocks from Crescent Court, one of the two buildings that Community Builders plans to rehab first. The other is the Poinciana at 3522 Reading.

Initial contacts with many residents in the five core buildings showed Community Builders had to take more elementary first steps.

“We are discovering some more fundamental needs than we’ve experienced elsewhere,” Beam said. The level of housekeeping and cleanliness was lower than expected, the instability in residents’ lives greater.

Community Builders distributed hundreds of spring-cleaning kits in buckets with this note: “Mantra for Great Housekeeping. I am grateful for the bathroom that I have to scrub, for the windows that need cleaning and the floors that require waxing because it means I have a home.”

“We have seen evidence of success because many residents called property managers requesting follow-up inspections,” Beam said.

Community outreach to the roughly 400 residents living in the 140 units was one of three main initial goals. The others were formation of a local steering committee with leaders from health care, social services, law enforcement and civic organizations and preparing grant applications for the low-income tax credit awards.

The Urban League of Cincinnati, the lead agency that will provide job-readiness, financial literacy and case management to residents, is finalizing its contract with The Community Builders, said Stephen Tucker, an Urban League vice president. Case workers will connect residents to additional mental health or substance abuse services, if necessary.

In all, the five core buildings and the four vacant ones contain 200 apartment units.

“The residents are buying in,” Beam said. “They are beginning to see what’s in it for them.”

Tiffany Chapel is sold and has offered to speak formally to other residents of Community Builders properties about the benefits of working with their new landlord.

“People can change, I did. I got swept up in the streets at one time. I am glad I got out,” said Chapel, who uses her experiences and those of the father of one of her sons, shot and killed in the West End 10 years ago, as cautionary tales for her family. She uses her new life and goals as examples for her family. She has her sights on being a registered nurse.

“My best days,” she said, “are ahead of me.”