



## Cedar Hill: Tenant Involvement

Cedar Hill seeks tenant input in a variety of ways, and offers tenants opportunities for both project involvement and employment. The sponsors have found that by offering a range of opportunities for involvement, more tenants participate. What follows are descriptions of tenant involvement in project design, day-to-day tenant involvement, and tenant employment. Also available are separate profiles on the [project](#) itself, as well as a look at Cedar Hill's [property management and services collaboration](#). [Sample documents](#) from the project and a [photo tour](#) are also available.

### **Tenant Involvement in Project Design**

Social service case managers with daily client contact were extensively involved in planning the development. In at least two cases, case managers took specific design issues to shelter clients for feedback.

Project planning focused on physical design that optimized tenant enjoyment and delivery of supportive services. Planning themes included a design that was attractive and well integrated into the neighborhood, offering maximum security for residents and incorporating opportunities for formal and informal community gatherings. As a result, Cedar Hill includes the following elements, many of which were influenced by tenant suggestions and concerns.

#### Site/Neighborhood:

- Site was chosen for “as of right” zoning (to minimize potential power of “NIMBY” reaction)
- Building mimics the three-story heights and setback of neighboring buildings
- Chosen design maximized the allowable zoning envelope. This, together with generous common areas, resulted in relatively efficient (and small - 380 square feet) efficiency apartments

#### Exterior/Building Elevations:

- Building largely matched the footprint of prior building (to minimize perceptions of change at the site)
- Cedar clapboard and iron front fence connote quality
- Generous planted areas allow for “friendly” appearance to passers-by
- Somewhat simple exterior design resists “showiness”

#### Common Areas/Circulation Areas:

- Single entry, front desk, and proximate service provider offices maximize sense of control and building entry
- Central air conditioning in common areas encourages gatherings there
- Semi-private rear yard with grill, patio, and garden facilitates informal and planned gatherings

- Durable finishes in hallways minimize maintenance costs (e.g., quarry tile entry, coarse vinyl wall coverings)

#### Apartments:

- Few, repeatable design alternatives reduced construction costs; three finish color schemes allowed some degree of tenant choice
- Full kitchenettes support self-reliance; kitchen in common lounge facilitates catered gatherings

### **Tenant Involvement Day-to-Day**

Cedar Hill does not currently have a tenant council. Services and property management staff spent considerable resources in the first few years of operations on establishing a council, but there was little interest among the residents in continuing this forum. Instead, tenants have devised several of their own unique, “natural” methods for becoming involved in day-to-day life at Cedar Hill:

- Residents have created a common garden in the back yard of the complex, which they tend together.
- They have initiated a Bible study that meets every other week with shared leadership.

Tenants have developed a number of regular social activities, and will watch movies together at least once a month, have a monthly community dinner toward the end of the month (when income is tightest), and often take trips together. Regular events also include cook-outs during the summer months, and holiday meals on major holidays. These events are all very well attended.

### **Tenant Board**

When Cedar Hill first opened, a Tenant Board was established. This was an essential part of increasing a sense of community and project-ownership early on. The Board was actively engaged in a number of issues, as the following example illustrates.

The lead property management and services managers were asked to attend Cedar Hill Tenant Board meeting to help address the subject of substance use at the property. Some of the tenants were concerned that a small number of tenants who were actively using drugs were disruptive to the whole community. Charles Klompus, HOME, Inc.’s Director of Property Management, and Emily Robinson, Columbus House’s Coordinator of Social Services, explained the staff’s role and Cedar Hill’s eviction policies. The group identified the need for a relapse prevention workshop for tenants, and Columbus House asked CSH for assistance. Tenants also asked about the possibility of visiting some New York-based tenants groups to get more ideas for their work. A twice-monthly “rap” group was also established to support tenants who might be especially vulnerable to relapse when entitlement checks arrived. Columbus House noted that this series of events indicated an increase sense of community and ownership at Cedar Hill.

Over time, tenants expressing decreasing interest in the Board and keeping it going, especially as issues in the building seemed to settle. The Tenant Board is no longer active, and tenants have found many other ways to stay connected. The sponsors see real value in tenant councils, and staff would be happy to help start another Board if tenants decide they want one.

## **Leadership Project**

Formerly homeless tenants with behavioral health disorders also have the opportunity to participate in Columbus House's unique training and empowerment initiative, called the Leadership Project. This project is designed to facilitate community integration by training participants on the interpersonal, public speaking, assertiveness, negotiation and conflict, networking and advocacy skills needed to take leadership positions on policy-making boards and program development initiatives. Students attend classes twice a week for ten weeks, after which "graduates" are encouraged to serve on local and statewide boards and action groups for a period of six months (e.g., New Haven Homeless Commission, Coalition to End Homelessness, a local soup kitchen, etc.). Students receive stipends for their participation. Columbus House is also in the process of tailoring its mentorship program to meet the needs of Cedar Hill tenants. This voluntary program will soon be available to tenants.

## **Tenant Employment**

Cedar Hill provides two opportunities for tenant employment on-site. Tenants are employed by HOME, Inc.:

1. Front Desk/Concierge Coverage: This provides a level of security and "eyes on the building" for up to five tenants who are interested in assuming this level of responsibility.
2. Janitorial Services: Tenants, as needed and available, undertake interior cleaning and some maintenance. Four to six tenants also voluntarily maintain the grounds and gardens.

## **Lessons Learned**

- Tenant self-esteem and employment potential increases through these activities.
- Many tenants are afraid to work, especially if they are on benefits that might be jeopardized. Little by little, active tenant involvement decreases the tendencies of isolation and fear of work, while increasing self-esteem and outlook on life.
- Many people who have been homeless for the long-term don't really know how to have fun in a healthful way, so Cedar Hill works to offer desirable opportunities.
- Like all work and community activities, different options appeal to different people. It's worth offering a range of options.