

THE HOUSING AGENDA:

A BRIEF CASE STUDY

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BY

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Introduction

The Housing Agenda was established in 1979 as a loose coalition of individuals and organizations working together on issues of housing for low-income residents of Chicago. It closed its office doors in 1985 after a decision was made not to replace its second Coordinator. During the intervening years, The Agenda grew from a one-staff member, unfunded working group to a six-staff, funded organization. Its membership more than doubled in size and it worked on a variety of legislative and programmatic issues, achieving some notable successes.

The Agenda's closing was sudden and a surprise to many funders and housing activists. For this reason, there has been little opportunity to reflect on The Agenda's history and accomplishments, to understand the dynamics involved in closing such an organization, or to assess the impact that its work has had on Chicago.

This report, commissioned by Woods Charitable Fund and prepared solely for use by its staff and directors, is an attempt to answer some of these questions. It draws upon interviews with active participants in The Housing Agenda. Its conclusions are those of the Woodstock Institute.

Methodology

The findings of this study were based on interviews with ten people who had been active in THA work, and review of proposals and reports in Woods' files. Each interview was conducted face-to-face at a location chosen by the interviewee. A lengthy questionnaire (see attached) resulted in long interviews--averaging 2-1/2 hours.

The following people were interviewed:

Ron Stevens	Founder and first Coordinator of THA
Bob Adams	Second Coordinator
Leroy Kennedy	THA staff member
Mosi Kitwana	THA staff member
Betty Booker	THA Oversight Committee member
Ralph Scott	THA Oversight Committee member (leadership of MTO)
Mel Skvarla	THA Oversight Committee member and final Co- Coordinator
Jerry Altman	HATF Coordinator and final THA Co-Coordinator
Bob Vondrasek	Director of SACCC and active in HATF and MTO
Bob Johnson	Early funder and technical assistant to THA

Those interviewed represent a range of roles, opinions, and level of involvement in The Housing Agenda. The interviewer found these people to be articulate and forthcoming with information and opinions. She discovered that those interviewed continue to feel strongly about THA and

the events that led to its closing. (The interviewer's report is attached to this summary report.)

Even with the lengthy interview process, careful selection of a representative group of participants, and their cooperation, it must be noted that the discussion that follows presents information from only a portion of THA participants. The scope of the project precluded further interviews or a more thorough review of documents.

History of The Housing Agenda

Formation

The Housing Agenda was started in 1979 by Ron Stevens, then a lawyer for the Legal Assistance Foundation. Stevens began working with housing organizations as part of a process to rethink LAF's approach to its housing work. Through this process he, and the groups he worked with, perceived a need for a city-wide coalition to get involved in low-income housing issues from an advocacy point of view. Stevens moved with the idea to the Business and Professionals in the Public Interest (BPI) which agreed to pay his salary, office space, mailing and secretarial costs for the first year of the project. In 1981, Ron Stevens left The Agenda and was replaced by Bob Adams who remained the coordinator until 1984.

The Housing Agenda was structured to allow community organization members to set the agenda and to avoid bureaucracy and the mistakes of

earlier coalitions. Members of The Agenda were called "participants" and the director was called "coordinator."

Decisions were made by consensus in frequent and lengthy meetings of the entire group of participating organizations. These were taken to the Oversight Committee, which set priorities for the coalition and decided on process for carrying out its work.

Members of the Oversight Committee were elected by consensus of The Agenda's membership. Oversight Committee slots were allotted equally to large community organizations, small organizations, technical assistance groups, and development organizations. (The three development group slots were never filled.) Their terms appear to have extended indefinitely.

Most of the work of the organization was carried out by issues committees composed of THA members with assistance from the coordinator.

The role of the one staff member (an assistant coordinator was added in 1980) was to provide technical assistance to and coordination of the participants.

In 1980, prior to the end of BPI's support, a decision was made by the membership to seek foundation funding and in 1981 grants were received from the Wieboldt Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, Albert Pick Fund, United Way's Coalition Fund, the Joyce Foundation and Sahara Coal Company. In 1982, BPI ended its support to The Agenda.

The early focus of The Agenda was on housing-related state legislative changes and initiatives. In 1981, a tenants conference was sponsored by The Agenda as part of its work on landlord/tenant issues. Those in attendance signed up to create a city-wide tenants committee, and this turned into the Metropolitan Tenants Organization (MTO). MTO had its own steering committee and was funded through THA. A number of active members of MTO were on The Agenda's Oversight Committee.

Other early Agenda projects included building code reform, and the North Loop Project.

Organizational Change

As the Agenda gained momentum, change occurred in a number of areas. The staff grew in size. The role of the Coordinator began to change. As early as the second year, the Coordinator added fundraising and direction of staff to his responsibilities, and by the time the second Coordinator joined The Agenda, his responsibilities were increasingly those of an executive director. As the staff grew in size, more projects were added and staff responsibilities became more specialized.

A second change was in focus. The early emphasis on legislation shifted to include direct action projects such as opposition to the North Loop tax incentives. A major new project, the Housing Abandonment Task Force (HATF), began in 1982 and brought new constituencies and special funding to the Agenda, as well as a second new focus on policy development.

Third, the responsibilities of the Oversight Committee became increasingly like those of a Board of Directors. The Committee assumed a policy making role and took on the administrative oversight function of directing staff and use of funds.

Accomplishments

During its short history, The Agenda achieved some significant success, both in the process it created and in the projects it carried out. Its process accomplishments included the following:

- For a relatively long period of time, it was a successful housing coalition.
- It provided a way for housing activists to share information and to work together to address city and state housing issues.
- It helped to develop leadership in dealing with housing.
- It helped bring housing issues to the attention of legislators and policy makers.
- It launched MTO, the Housing Abandonment Task Force, and the Campaign to Save Affordable Housing.

The Housing Agenda's programmatic contributions included the following:

- It developed and introduced the Tenants Bill of Rights.
- It carried out extensive work on building court reform.

-- It established a city-wide foreclosure coalition, the Housing Abandonment Task Force and the North Loop Development Project.

Of these, the Tenants' Bill of Rights, the North Loop Project, and the HATF were considered major successes by those interviewed.

Tenants Bill of Rights. This MTO project resulted in the drafting of eleven tenant protection ordinances and their introduction into the City Council. The Agenda made the Tenants Bill of Rights a major issue in the mayoral campaign and, though legislation has not been passed, developed significant attention to and support for tenants rights reforms in city government and the media.

North Loop Development. The Agenda spearheaded the Campaign Against the North Loop Tax Break in order to oppose a \$450 million tax break for developers in the North Loop. They were able to work with Assessor Hynes in developing a consensus against a substantial tax incentive for Hilton Hotels and succeeded in blocking the program.

Housing Abandonment Task Force. This two-year study and action process was a unique collaboration of neighborhood organizations and city-wide policy groups. Based on research on buildings, experience of developers, and extensive discussion, it developed a comprehensive set of recommendations designed to end further loss of moderately-priced housing in the city. Some of its programmatic recommendations have been implemented and others are underway. A longer-term coalition, the Campaign

to Save Affordable Housing, continues to work towards implementation of HATF recommendations.

Closing The Housing Agenda

Towards Closing

Several events preceded the final closing of The Housing Agenda as a staffed organization in 1985 (it should be noted that the Oversight Committee remains in existence). In January of 1984, Bob Adams, the coordinator, was placed on probation by the Oversight Committee due to problems they perceived in insufficient fundraising and high staff turnover. Subsequently, Bob Adams resigned as coordinator in July of 1984. Without a staff member available to assume the coordinator's responsibilities, Mel Skvarla, President of the Oversight Committee, and Jerry Altman, HATF coordinator, assumed the responsibilities of (paid) co-coordinators. During this time a search was undertaken for a new coordinator, but interviewing stopped due to insufficient funding and difference of opinion among members of the Oversight Committee regarding the future direction of The Agenda.

In December of 1984, both the HATF and the MTO notified the Oversight Committee that they intended to continue their work independently of The Housing Agenda.

In January of 1985, Mel Skvarla and Jerry Altman resigned. Shortly thereafter, the office was closed and files moved to one of the Oversight

Committee's (Betty Booker) home. Booker became President of the Oversight Committee. In May, 1985 a letter of intent to dissolve the corporation was circulated by The Agenda's legal counsel.

By January of 1985, when The Agenda closed its offices, it faced a number of problems. 1) Fundraising had been unsuccessful, it had substantial debts, and few financial resources remained. 2) The Oversight Committee had become factionalized and its meetings increasingly confrontational as members associated with MTO pressed for a greater percentage of THA resources to be allocated to tenant issues. 3) Meetings were poorly attended, staff morale was low, and communication between Oversight Committee and Coordinator, and between Coordinator and staff was poor.

Like much of The Agenda's earlier change, its closing was unplanned, coming as a surprise to many of its members. While there was never an affirmative decision made to close The Agenda, some of those interviewed suggested that the MTO "faction" on the Oversight Committee had initiated and supported the key decision not to hire a new coordinator.

Analysis of Closing

The closing of The Housing Agenda can be better understood by looking at three broad areas: first, the organization's response to change and adaptation to new roles; second, the relationship of special projects, and in particular the MTO and HATF to The Agenda's functioning; and third, the role of funders.

Response to Change

The Agenda began as a coalition with a participatory decision-making structure and a "membership by participation" policy. While coalitions are generally short-lived and formed to address an immediate goal or a particular issue which will have a natural point of conclusion, this coalition was open-ended in its goals, activities, and future. Not only are the housing problems it was formed to address too large to ever be finally solved, but The Agenda made little attempt to define its niche within these problems. In addition, its members brought their own interests and priorities to The Agenda, increasing the scope even more. Thus, the coalition structure was used to address a purpose that demanded increasing resources and activities. This produced an increase in staff size and membership, as well as a longer list of projects and activities.

As staff size and membership increased, The Agenda needed to function more like a stable organization and to redefine its role. This change took place without explicit acknowledgement of the changing needs. For example, the coordinator's position grew to include fundraising and management even before the second coordinator was hired, yet the individual chosen expressed (at least in retrospect) a reluctance to assume the responsibilities of executive director and a preference for program work over management.

The mismatch between coordinator interest and skills and THA organizational needs resulted in insufficient fundraising work, rapid staff

turnover, and in the failure build an organization of experienced, trained staff (including the failure to select and prepare a successor to the coordinator). By the time the coordinator resigned, the problem of staff turnover had become so great that there were no professionals remaining on The Agenda staff. This meant that there was no one to step in as a temporary replacement, and that any **new** coordinator would have to rebuild the organization from almost nothing.

The Oversight Committee presents another example of a lack of explicit acknowledgement of change. Initially, the Oversight Committee set priorities and procedures **after** policy and program decisions were made by the membership. As the membership got larger, the Oversight Committee functioned more and more like a board of directors. It took on responsibilities for supervision of staff and budget, as well as policy decisions. Yet there appears to have been little understanding of this new role among either membership or the Oversight Committee itself. There is also little evidence of growth in understanding of the Oversight Committee role, even as the Committee faced difficult hiring, firing and policy making decisions.

Several factors inhibited the successful adaptation by the Oversight Committee to its new roles and responsibilities. First, no new members were ever added to the Committee once the first election had taken place (except that replacements for two members who died were appointed by their respective organizations). This meant that the Oversight Committee was not formally accountable to the members of The Agenda through a reelection process.

Second, the Oversight Committee, and thus the leadership of The Agenda, did not change to include representatives of new projects undertaken by the Agenda. Thus, for example, no representatives of the Housing Abandonment Task Force, a major Agenda project, were represented on the Oversight Committee.

Third, a faction developed within the Oversight Committee (those active in MTO) which was not counterbalanced by those representing other Agenda projects and constituencies. This faction disrupted meetings and had a clear goal of increasing the resources devoted to tenant issues.

The lack of explicit acknowledgement of change resulted in a lack of clarity of the roles and responsibilities of staff and Oversight Committee in decision making and in organizational supervision. Different perceptions of who made the decisions were apparent in the interviews, and there was an absence of clear processes, procedures, or lines of communication. This led to Oversight Committee members thinking that the Coordinator was making the decisions, or giving them insufficient information to make decisions, and staff to think that they were respecting the decision-making structure of the organization. It also led to staff confusion as to how they related to the "board" and how grievances were to be expressed.

Finally, opportunities to recruit new members and to provide new services may have been overlooked. While the number of organizations with some relationship to one or more of The Agenda's projects increased significantly over its history, many of these groups were not very active

in its work, and others, like the housing rehabilitation organizations and many smaller and emerging advocacy organizations were not actively recruited. In addition, many who worked on projects associated with The Agenda identified with the project (e.g. HATF) and not the organization as a whole.

A natural role for a housing coalition turned organization would include the provision of support services, but there seemed to be little consideration given to providing services like library, newsletter, or workshops to serve the members in a manner other than coalition coordination.

Special Projects

The roles of the two major, ongoing special projects were significant to The Agenda's history. The Metropolitan Tenants Organization (MTO) was an early project which was part of The Agenda but with a partially separate set of priorities and constituents. Founded in 1981, its focus is on landlord/tenant issues. Leaders of the MTO made up a majority of the Oversight Committee. These were the Oversight Committee members who were most instrumental in closing The Agenda.

A major issue on the Oversight Committee was the proportion of Agenda resources to be devoted to MTO activities. The early (and only) agreement between The Agenda and MTO spelled out MTO's responsibilities for fundraising and The Agenda's role in supporting MTO work. This agreement, if it was ever in written form, can no longer be found, and significant

controversy arose over its provisions. This produced disputes regarding funds to be raised by the Agenda for MTO, funds to be provided from operating budgets to MTO, and percentage of staff time and other Agenda resources to be devoted to tenant issues. These disputes are reported to have disrupted Oversight Committee meetings and to have reduced attendance by those who wanted to avoid conflict. The MTO was a single faction within the Agenda and as such was not balanced by other strong interests.

The Housing Abandonment Task Force (HATF) was the other prominent special project of the Agenda. As a successful coalition of a large number of housing organizations, HATF might be viewed as a replacement for The Housing Agenda. It had a specific goal and limited duration, which allowed it to succeed in its mission and spin off its successor.

The HATF was housed at The Agenda but had its own steering committee and structure. This project took an increasing amount of The Agenda's staff resources because it brought in funds and required an enormous effort of administration and coordination of the many participants. While almost a hundred organizations participated in the HATF, and about a dozen participated actively, no HATF representatives were added to The Agenda's Oversight Committee.

The contrast between the two major projects of The Agenda is striking. While the MTO was pressing its claim for an increasing share of Agenda resources, HATF was bringing in funds. While MTO was arguing over staff time devoted to tenant issues, HATF hired its own staff. While MTO was

fighting to control the Oversight Committee, HATF created its own steering committee.

It is clear that the special projects of The Agenda disrupted its functioning. This was due to 1) The Agenda's weak organizational structure; 2) imbalance between different factions; 3) no method of allocating resources based on organizational priorities; 4) no established priorities based on the goals of the organization; and 5) no accountability mechanisms between leadership and the projects and their participants.

Funder Role

Inadequate financial resources was a major reason for final closing of The Housing Agenda. Following the resignation of the second coordinator, many of The Agenda's previous funders were reluctant to continue support. In some cases this was due to concern about stability of the organization when it was left without a director. Some of those interviewed thought that the coordinator had conveyed an image of instability to funders when he notified them of his resignation. Others were concerned that the funding relationship had been too closely tied to the individual (the coordinator) rather than the organization. And finally, there was some evidence that inadequate attention was paid to fundraising responsibilities in the year preceding closing.

The funding question was further complicated by a parallel fundraising effort by the HATF. This caused confusion, especially when a funder felt (s)he was being approached twice by the same organization.

The lack of continued support to The Agenda by some of its regular contributors after the coordinator resigned contributed to its instability. Oversight Committee factionalism was increased by disagreements over allocation of remaining funds, and limited funding made hiring a new coordinator even more difficult.

Conclusion

The impact of The Housing Agenda's work continues to be felt in Chicago. The MTO, Campaign to Save Affordable Housing, and city and state foreclosure coalitions are part of its legacy to the city. A greater familiarity among community and city-wide housing organizations has developed based on their experience working together within The Agenda. This development allows housing work to continue in a more effective and coordinated way than ever before. At the same time, no other organization has assumed the responsibilities for coordinating, organizing and serving advocacy organizations with housing interests so it is unclear if this cooperation will be able to continue.

The organizational problems experienced by The Agenda are not unusual for a not-for-profit organization. Often started by dedicated and technically experienced individuals who want to carry out social change, these groups encounter a new set of challenges as their idea becomes successful. The growth process of an organization should ideally be a conscious process of planning goals, structures, and procedures. However,

the "idea" people who start such organizations are not always those with interest or experience in long-range organizational planning or management.

The Housing Agenda faced these problems and others relating to its structure as a coalition. Since coalitions are usually short term in duration, relying on the mutual interest of a number of diverse organizations coming together on a particular problem or issue, there are built-in conflicts in trying to establish a long-term, open-ended coalition. How do the diverging goals and philosophies of members get resolved over the long term? How do survival needs such as fundraising and decision-making take place? How can the members' needs for recognition and funding continue without competing with the coalition? These questions lead to the conclusion that a coalition would have to become something else in order to survive. In the case of The Housing Agenda, it is clear that it did. However, the transition did not take place in a planned or thoughtful manner, and questions of its structure were not adequately addressed. Therefore, the problems overwhelmed The Agenda's considerable strengths, causing the organization to close down.

The lessons to be learned by community development practitioners and funders from The Housing Agenda's experience relate to the special natures of coalitions, the needs of organizations, and questions of accountability.

As a coalition, The Housing Agenda was a success. It mobilized the resources of a variety of groups and was able to bring housing issues to

public attention, to influence programs to improve housing, and to spin off some long-term housing efforts.

The difficulties for The Agenda arose when it got to be too big in its membership, scope of work, and duration to continue successfully with a coalition structure. It then faced problems due, on the one hand, to insufficient attention to organization building at the staff, board, and membership levels, and, on the other hand, to an unclear vision of what the organization could or should become. At the same time, communications and accountability between different parts of the organization broke down, rendering it unable to solve organizational problems.

Both the successes and the failures of The Housing Agenda are crucial to the understanding of future housing work in Chicago. The success of the coalition shows that such a structure can be a powerful instrument of social change. Its organizational failures show how important staff and board development, long-range planning, clear goals, a vision of the future, and accountability are to the long-term existence of any effective organization.

ATTACHMENT:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

THE HOUSING AGENDA DRAFT EVALUATION

Organization Beginnings:

- 1) How did the organization get started?
- 2) What was the purpose of starting The Housing Agenda?
- 3) What was your role in The Agenda in the beginning?
- 4) Who else was involved at the beginning?
- 5) What was the original structure of the Agenda? Who did what on the staff? Who was on the Board? How were Board members selected? How did Board and Staff communicate? Who was responsible for making the decisions?
- 6) Who funded the Agenda? What did the funders expect it to do with the money?

Organization Development:

As the organization got older, what changes occurred, if any, in the following areas:

- 7) Your role?

- 8) Who participated?
- 9) Mission of the organization?
- 10) Activities of the organizations?
- 11) Staff Makeup and responsibilities?
- 12) Board composition and responsibilities?
- 13) Funders and their expectations?
- 14) When and why did MTO join the Agenda? Did that change the way it functioned?
- 15) When and why did HATF join the Agenda? Did that change the way it functioned?
- 16) Where there any other major special projects that were important to The Agenda? What were they and how were they integrated into The Agenda's work?
- 17) What projects did THA take on over the years and how was it determined what resources to allocate to each project?
- 18) What projects were successful? Why?

- 19) What projects were not successful? Why not?
- 20) Were there informal decision makers? If so, what impact did they have on THA?

Closing the Organization:

- 21) When did it become evident to you that The Agenda was "in trouble"?
- 22) Who participated in making the decision to close the organization and why was that decision made?
- 23) What was your role in deciding to close the organization?
- 24) What were the problems facing the Agenda at the time that it closed?
How were these problems being addressed by the staff? By the Board?

Overall assessment:

- 25) What are some of the difficulties in coalition development and maintenance? How did the Agenda address these difficulties?
- 26) What were the Agenda's significant accomplishments? What did it fail to accomplish?
- 27) As a member, how did you benefit from THA?

- 28) Is there a need for another organization to fulfill the Agenda's function?
- 29) Are other organizations now fulfilling the Agenda's functions? Who and how?
- 30) Do you consider the ending of the Agenda as a staffed organization to be a success, a failure or neither? Explain.
- 31) What does the Agenda's experience mean for other potential housing coalitions?
- 32) What would have made the difference for the Agenda?
- 33) What else do you think we should know that we haven't asked about?