



# A “Can-Do” Process for a “Can-Do” Community:

*Collaborating for Change in Housing and Community Development in Dubuque*

Dubuque is making headlines. Last year the City won a national “Best Practice Award” from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for its innovative approach to bringing the community together around the issue of housing. HUD recognized the Housing Services Department for bringing the best principles of good customer service to the business of government. How? By applying the art and science of listening. It is good business and good government. The results have transformed the way the Housing Services Department does its business. Over the past year the city has involved hundreds of people, from diverse parts of the community, in building new relationships across boundaries, imagining the future they want, and creating strategies for change.

On February 11 the city will implement Phase Two of this process. About 80 invitees, representing seven key “stakeholder” groups (government, commerce, community leaders, housing development and management, landlords, tenants/consumers, essential services) will come together for “Invest Yourself in Dubuque: An Action Conference”. In this conference, community members will determine the community’s strategic directions and priorities for public investment of \$20 million over the next 5 years for programs and services in housing and community and economic development. The March issue of **Julien’s Journal** will report the outcome of the Action Conference.

**An Innovative Approach  
to Collaboration**

In the fall of 1998, relationships between many landlords and the city were contentious. Rule making and enforcement around housing inspection standards had angered many landlords. A few had even demanded that David Harris, manager of the Housing Services Department, be fired. Harris struggled with balancing regulatory and enforcement requirements with his strong desire to reinvigorate his organization with a customer service orientation. Harris says, “The public felt that we weren’t listening and that we didn’t care.”

Both the Housing Commission (a citi-

spective and a strong moral voice. Together they established a Planning Committee to lead this effort. The planning committee wanted a process that would inspire a “can do” spirit in a “can do” community.

They used the “appreciative inquiry” approach that is based on empirical evidence in the fields of health, education, child development, athletics, and even politics, which shows that people and organizations are far more likely to be successful in change efforts if they study their successes instead of their failures. Then by applying their successful practices to areas where they need to change, they create an “affirmative competence” or “self efficacy.”

Sixty citizens were trained in the “appreciative interview” process. Through early 1999 they conducted interviews with over 220 citizens – landlords, tenants, local government officials, lenders,

social services professionals and neighborhood and church leaders. They inquired into people’s beliefs about what is “best” about living in Dubuque, about what people most value about their own housing, about the “best practices” of customer service in the City’s Housing Services Department, and about what they hoped for or wished could be better in the future.

Last February, 80 of these participants came together in a Housing Summit. They told stories from the interviews, discovered shared values, and tried to better understand each other and the larger system. They built new relationships, found common ground, and discovered some shared

*Over the past year the city has involved hundreds of people, from diverse parts of the community, in building new relationships across boundaries, imagining the future they want, and creating strategies for change.*

zen board appointed by the city council) and Harris wanted to find a new way to listen to the public. And they wanted to find a better way to get all the parts of the community’s housing system to come together to listen to each other, and work more effectively across their boundaries and differences to plan for the city’s future housing needs. The city engaged the services of a management consultant, Laverne Webb, to help them design a process to do this. Harris and the Commission invited a newly established Intercongregational Housing Project (IHP) led by Sr. Helen Huewe to plan with them. The IHP brought two important ingredients into the equation – a broader per-

visions for the future. One landlord summed it up best, "I felt maybe it was all for naught, but we were heard...There is and can be camaraderie between the different factions – landlords, tenants, housing providers...Coming together we can all work toward the same goal...And we'll do what our conscience and our hearts tell us to do, what is best for the community."

Where there was acrimony, there is now more cooperation. People are working on new projects, like transitional housing for women and children, on task forces, addressing thorny enforcement issues and appeals processes, and on planning the Action Conference that will take the next steps and carry this work into the future.

### **Changing the Culture in Government**

Harris reports, "The theme I most remember from "listening" to the interviews was that we needed to do a better job of respecting the rights and needs of the public...Now we try to frame every initiative for changes in policies and procedures within the customer's perspective. Does this benefit the customer? Is it necessary? Can we do this together? And we try in every way possible to remain in better contact with our customers, to hear how we're doing."

Harris' staff is the first to say that customer responsiveness is more time consuming. The rules are not so clear anymore. Yet they have implemented many initiatives, streamlined processes, forms and letters and made them less "bureau-

cratic and officious." Harris reports that everyone is now challenged to be part of the solution. He sees each staff member as an expert on how to do things better.

### **The Action Conference Challenge**

These are not easy issues with simple solutions, as we see in cities like Vail, Colorado, and others across the country. And getting to this point in Dubuque was not easy. It took a lot of perseverance. Many people had to come out of their corners and talk honestly about what they value, and what they want the future to be. The community is now moving toward those positive images of the future. That is why Dubuque received a 1999 HUD Best Practice Award. Dubuque has proven that it is a "can-do" community. When these eighty community members gather for the Action Conference on February 11, they will be building on the foundation of positive relationships and images established over the past year.

Look for details on the ideas, actions,

and commitments of Dubuque's citizens for investing in housing and community development in the March issue of **Julien's Journal**.

*[Editor's note: This article was submitted by EnCompass, Inc., a management consulting business, on behalf of the Housing Services Department of the city of Dubuque.]* ♦