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In Baltimore City, the lives of public housing residents and those of residents in surrounding neighborhoods are undergoing significant change. Our worst housing is being systematically transformed into some of our best. The city is rewaving its social fabric, making it stronger, more vibrant, more sustainable.

This is being accomplished with low-income public housing residents driving the thinking and working hand in hand with various private-sector players, who are typically shy of public housing. Through the federally-funded Urban Revitalization Demonstration, Baltimore’s four most troubled communities—with eighteen high-rise, brick monoliths from the past—are some of the hottest development sites in the city.

All four sites are just blocks from Baltimore’s world-renowned Inner Harbor. Two sites, comprising eleven high-rises, have been cleaned, one (Pleasant View Gardens) has been entirely rebuilt and the other is just popping out of the ground. A third site is being readied for imploding in July and the last recently was awarded federal funding. Together, the four sites represent a half-billion dollars in neighborhood revitalization.

In 1991, Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke convened a task force to recommend solutions for our troubled family high-rise communities, which were consuming enormous amounts of public resources. In July, 1993, the task force concluded (for the first time ever in Baltimore) that certain public housing developments should be demolished because it made no sense to rehabilitate them. Lafayette Courts alone was costing $1 million per year in elevator repairs. Together, the four developments represented the state’s single largest concentration of poverty, with nearly 85 percent of their residents on public assistance, compared to 60 percent, on average, in the rest of the city’s public housing. Average income was under $6,000 per year, significantly lower than the average for the rest of the city. Crime was off the charts.

The four developments comprised a total of 2,551 units on 63 acres. The city’s plan was not to rebuild quality housing but also to reduce the on-site population density dramatically by building smaller communities elsewhere. More than 1,000 units are being replaced through small, mixed-income, infill and renovation projects scattered throughout the city and many residents are opting for Section 8 vouchers.

Our relocation strategy includes several programs that help residents move to surrounding suburbs. One program, called Moving to Opportunity, will monitor the progress of 243 families for five years. Half the families are in a control group, with little social or placement assistance compared to the target group. Initial findings show that job acquisition and retention, as well as education benchmarks for children, have improved for the target group.

The thrust of the program was to make public housing safe and pleasant, and to provide opportunities for social and economic advancement. Residents of our four revitalized communities have opportunities to become better educated on-site, access to on-site daycare and recreation services, job-search assistance, computer skills enhancement and opportunities to begin their own businesses.

As the developments are rebuilt, was has partnered to provide construction-training programs, such as “Step-Up,” which has become a national model. Hundreds of residents work at attractive wages and side-by-side with skilled union workers in twelve skill areas, such as plumbing, carpentry and tiling.

Lafayette Courts
Designed in the 1940s and built in the early 1950s, Lafayette Courts’ six high-rise towers were aimed at eliminating urban decay. Unfortunately, all of the towers were built to the absolute minimum of standards, as if public housing residents would not need air-conditioners, washers and dryers, could not afford televisions or hair dryers, or would not need more than 650 square feet of living space. Engineering reports estimated that systems upgrades would cost some $10 million per building.

The project began declining in the 1970s, and by the mid-1980s, Lafayette Courts and its three sister develop...
The quality of the housing in the neighborhood is a major concern. The neighborhood has many older, poorly maintained buildings that are in need of repair. Some of these buildings are in close proximity to each other, creating a sense of overcrowding. The need for decent housing is urgent, as many residents are living in substandard conditions.

The economic situation in the neighborhood is also a significant issue. Many residents work in low-paying jobs and struggle to make ends meet. The lack of affordable housing options is a major problem, as many families are forced to live in overcrowded conditions. The high cost of living in the area also makes it difficult for residents to save money for emergencies or to invest in their future.

The neighborhood also faces challenges in terms of safety and security. Crime rates are higher than in other areas of the city, and residents are concerned about their personal safety. This is especially true for those who live in older, run-down buildings that lack adequate security features.

Despite these challenges, the neighborhood has a strong sense of community and is working to address these issues. Many residents are actively involved in local organizations and initiatives that are dedicated to improving their living conditions. With the support of the community and the city, the neighborhood has the potential to overcome these challenges and create a more vibrant and livable environment.