

The Development and Evolution Of A Housing Information Center

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Where do homeowners on fixed incomes go to find out how to get government funds for energy-saving home improvements? When housing professionals or planning students need specialized data for research projects, where can they find a central repository of housing-related information? Who can elderly people turn to for help in planning ways to make their homes and neighborhoods more secure places to live? More Pittsburgh area residents and community organizations than ever before have found that the best answer to questions like these is the Housing Information Center of ACTION-Housing, Inc.

The Allegheny Council to Improve our Neighborhoods-Housing Inc.-ACTION-Housing, Inc. — was created in 1957 to address the problems of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods, to provide housing to those who were not being served by the private market, to focus public and private attention and dollars on neighborhood needs, to generate community participation, and to assist with the development of strategies for neighborhood preservation. ACTION-Housing has worked to meet these goals through education, research, development, community organization and the administration of housing programs.

ACTION-Housing is a United Way agency and, although much of its funding comes from grants and contracts, it is the operating base provided by the United Way that permits ACTION-Housing to focus on community need.

Since the inception of ACTION-Housing, outreach activities have been an important part of the agency's effort to improve the information flow

about housing. ACTION-Housing staff members regularly serve on community review boards, panels and committees. They conduct training sessions to form community housing advocacy networks. They engage in promotional activities to provide communities with information about programs which ACTION-Housing administers.

ACTION-Housing's Education and Community Affairs division takes primary responsibility for the agency's educational and community assistance functions. This division provides outreach services to housing professionals, social service agents, neighborhood groups, students and organizations representing populations with special needs. It creates linkages among the various groups in the community which seek to correct housing deficiencies, serves as a vehicle for facilitating communication among these groups, acts as a clearing-house for housing information, and addresses current housing-related issues.

The functions of education and community affairs rely on cooperation among existing community resources. However, in recent years the community has recognized a need for forms of education and information which are not readily available to the consumer.

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Research on Housing Information Needs

Representatives of public, consumer and community agencies in the Pittsburgh area have often indicated that there are many housing problems which might be remedied by making housing information and education more directly available to the community. Based on concerns that have been voiced informally about the need for housing information, in 1978 ACTION-Housing decided to look more systematically at the extent and degree of people's need for information about housing. ACTION-Housing undertook a multi-faceted project from January to May, 1978 to examine housing information needs and the availability of housing information in the Pittsburgh area.

There were three components to ACTION-Housing's analysis of housing information needs:

- 1) a literature search to identify and define the major categories of housing consumers and to develop a basic list of significant housing problems faced by each of them,
- 2) a series of interviews with representatives of consumer, public, and community groups who deal with housing problems
 - a) to elicit data about the specific information needs of each target audience in regard to housing
 - b) to assess whether education would help consumers solve these problems
- 3) a survey of adult continuing education programs and secondary school consumer education programs to determine what types of housing education are currently available, to what extent the needs of each audience are being met, and what further housing education is needed/desired by each of the audiences.

The end results of this research identify informational gaps and provide a basis for devising strategies for meeting the housing information needs of specific groups of housing consumers, service providers and educators. These target audiences are:

- displaced homemakers

- elderly
- handicapped
- housing professionals
- low income and minority families
- neighborhood groups
- secondary school and college students
- teachers and education majors

ACTION-Housing's research indicates that each of these target audiences has different informational needs. In order to respond to these needs, the Housing Information Center has moved in three major directions, developing in regard to its programs, materials and capacities for referral.

Programs And Training Sessions

The programs, scheduled on a monthly basis or in response to requests from consumer organizations, take the form of workshops, seminars, conferences and meetings which treat a specific housing subject or problem area. They are open to the public and are usually conducted jointly with other organizations, utilizing existing community resources and expertise and creating and strengthening linkages among them.

The Center has been responsible for a variety of information programs conducted for the benefit of associations of the physically handicapped, senior citizens' groups, women's centers, housing and social service professionals, and minorities. They explore such topics as barrier-free design for the physically handicapped, techniques of community organization, the legal rights and responsibilities of homeownership, what to do about housing discrimination, maintenance and repair of the home and neighborhood analysis.

The Housing Information Center has recently conducted a series of inservice training sessions for public and parochial school teachers in the Pittsburgh area. Two meetings of the Center's Housing Education Advisory Committee in late 1979 allowed us to identify the forms in which housing information might best be offered in the classroom. These meetings were attended by edu-

cators and administrators of the Pittsburgh Public School Board, as well as Pittsburgh area vocational and parochial schools and the community colleges. Meetings were held with individual educators and school administrators to advise them about the Housing Information Center's housing consumer education programs.

At each in-service training session, Housing Information Center staff demonstrate the use of ACTION-Housing informational resources, distribute an annotated bibliography of materials, show one to two films, describe the content and flexibility of the informational packages and arrange for the distribution of booklets and other written materials. Participation and feedback are encouraged. Teachers are asked what information they feel they need, how the materials can be improved upon and what additional subjects ought to be included. An evaluation sheet is distributed which provides the teachers with another opportunity to indicate whether they feel the materials are useful and offer suggestions about how they can be improved.

In-service training sessions have been conducted or are scheduled to be conducted for teachers of home economics classes and social studies classes at the Pittsburgh Public Schools, all elementary school teachers and secondary school home economics teachers at the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, as well as for a variety of Pittsburgh area vocational schools and community colleges.

Development And Dissemination Of Written And Audio-Visual Materials

The development and dissemination of informational materials is another public education function performed by the Center. At programs and other informational events, as well as at the request of consumer organizations, the Housing Information Center disseminates informational materials on a regular basis.

In 1979 the Center developed *Toward Barrier-Free Design*, a report designed to sensitize housing professionals to the housing needs and pro-

blems of the physically handicapped. The report was distributed to over 200 architects, planners, developers and designers across Allegheny County.

The Center's "Fact Sheet on Community Organization" was sent to over 200 Allegheny County neighborhood groups.

Saving Energy, a 16 page illustrated booklet of facts and tips on conserving residential fuel was developed specifically for senior citizens by speaking personally with hundreds of older adults and adapting their ideas into an informational product. The Housing Information Center received requests from Allegheny County senior citizens' groups for over 2000 copies, necessitating a second printing of the booklet.

Understanding Home Maintenance was developed in response to the information needs of neighborhood groups, students, prospective homeowners and consumers in general. Designed in cooperation with the Pittsburgh Architects Workshop, it is a 20 page booklet providing detailed information on preventive maintenance for home improvements and dealing with contractors. It includes useful illustrations depicting the house as a series of systems and a directory of local resources for home improvements.

Housing and Related Services for Senior Citizens, printed in July, 1980, includes information about low cost rental housing, nursing homes, adult day care programs, senior citizens' centers, housing counseling programs and related services. There is also a section for homeowners who need financial assistance for home improvements. This booklet is intended to assist social service providers, government agencies and others concerned with the housing problems confronting senior citizens. Telephone numbers are listed wherever possible to allow the reader to obtain additional, specific information about these programs and services.

The Housing Information Center has expanded its library to include a variety of audio-visual materials on housing and housing-related subjects. Movies, slide shows, and film-strips are

now available to the community through the Center's library. These resources treat such subjects as home-security, energy conservation and community organization techniques. All of the agency's written materials have been organized and codified and many written and audio-visual materials have been coordinated to form informational packages. With the adoption and finalization of a formal lending procedure, the Center can now boast of an excellent library of specialized and varied housing data.

Referral Capacities

The referral component of ACTION-Housing's public education function is the domain of the Housing Information Center's Information and Referral Service. The Housing Information and Referral Service collects housing information and refers consumers to agents in the community which provide resources and assistance for housing problems. Utilizing a manual retrieval system, these data are cross-indexed into various sub-categories: housing subjects, services, programs, agencies and publications by the agencies. This indexing procedure provides prompt and direct access to programs which deal with particular housing concerns. The consumer is referred to the agency or service which can best respond to specific housing needs.

The Center's focus in 1980 was on making its services available to greater numbers. The Housing Information/Referral Service received 146 calls for information and assistance during a six-month period from January 1 to July 11, 1980. During the summer of 1980 a concentrated media campaign was developed to make the public more aware of the Housing Information Center's services. The campaign included a variety of radio and television public service announcements and appearances on television talk shows. The Referral Service received 511 calls during a two-month period from July 11 to September 15, 1980. The media campaign seems to have generated *six times* as many requests for information.

Requests for copies of the Housing Information Center's informational materials have intensified since the summer media campaign. Our records reveal that 111 of the 511 calls in July, August and September were requests for referral to specific housing-related programs or agencies and that 400 were requests for copies of ACTION-Housing publications. By September, 1980, a total of 5,689 publications had been distributed and an additional 1,593 were on order.

The Future

The Housing Information Center seeks to continue to expand its services and programs to meet the information needs of a wider audience. A number of social service departments at Pittsburgh area hospitals have expressed an interest in having more information about local housing programs and services. The Housing Information Center would like to strengthen its impact by training social workers to utilize its materials and resources effectively. We are especially interested in developing an in-service training program for hospital social workers. Such a program, however, ought not to be developed without the proper guidance. We intend to meet with Pittsburgh area social service directors themselves to ascertain what the Housing Information Center might do to meet the needs of social workers in hospitals. The Center needs to determine the types of information these professionals feel will be most beneficial to hospital social workers and establish how it might best be presented.

Materials in process for 1980-81 include: *You May Be A Victim Of Housing Discrimination*, a pamphlet explaining how to recognize discrimination when buying or renting and what the renter can do to protect and defend him/her self; *Fields for Women in Community Development*, a slide show composed of a series of interviews with women professionals from various backgrounds and jobs, discussing how they came to choose their fields; *Facts and Tips for Renters*, a listing of resources which should be helpful in locating

housing, interpreting leases, resolving problems regarding code violations, and finding inexpensive furniture, developed specifically for the student population, low income consumers, and nei-

ghborhood groups; and *The Pittsburgh Housing Glossary*, an annotated guide to housing terms, services and resources for citizens of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, specifically designed for young people and students.