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DAVID HICKS
Chairperson

Commission on Disabilities Minutes
April 14, 2008

Present: Dana Canevari, Chris Getlein, David Hicks, Stan Kontogiannis, Elaine Quinn, Matthew Ranelli, Linda Reeder, Heiwa Salovitz, Delma Skinner, Robin Tousey-Ayers

Staff: Michelle Duprey

David Hicks opened the meeting. William Heinrichs from the Housing Authority of the City of New Haven joined the group as the guest speaker. After introductions William Heinrichs addressed the group.

William Heinrichs opened his presentation by stating there has been progress in the area of disability rights and that we have come a long way in 25 years. He currently manages reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities at the Housing Authority of New Haven (HANH). He said he has improved the process over the last several months and explained some of the difficulties that are now addressed differently.

He spoke about the need for advocacy in the City that provides some hands-on assistance. He also talked about the relationship between rights and resources, in that if there are no resources, then there are no rights. He feels that housing problems are a symptom of poverty and that stakeholders will need to pursue new legislation in order to make systemic changes.

He stated that HANH is one of twenty-four Moving to Work sites and with that provides funds for modernization and new construction. However he sees problems with the Section 8 voucher program as private landlords have no responsibility to pay for accessibility improvements. HANH is now able to go up to 150% of the Fair Market Rent in order to pay for apartments which are wheelchair accessible, an incentive for landlords to adapt rental units.

William Heinrichs went on to discuss what HANH is doing with the Voluntary Agreement with HUD with regard to its focus on accessible apartments. Currently they are conducting a survey of all accessible units, e.g. where they are and if occupants living there need the accessible features. They are ensuring that the apartments are being used by people who need them, and moving them out if they don't need the features.

Elaine Quinn asked about the number to turn over. William Heinrichs said there are 1500 units. They are putting about 20 a month back on line and about t 90 or so are accessible. Those are the ones they are looking at.

Elaine Quinn asked a question about HANH's priorities for placing people at the top of their waiting lists. William Heinrichs explained their system. Elaine Quinn commented that they have come a long way as in the past they would not have been able to know how many units were accessible.

William Heinrichs digressed from this topic and spoke about the need for advocacy in New Haven and suggested that the development of an Advocacy Institute would be in order. He expressed his concern with non-responsiveness of the service community.

William Heinrichs passed out some written materials to members of the Commission and introduced Andre Dawkins to the group.

Delma Skinner asked about the ability of HANH to assist persons who might have difficulties with the application process. William Heinrichs said HANH received about 27,000 phone calls per year and have four staff members who respond to those calls, and that people don't have standing until they are residents, so he did not think the staff could be held accountable for assisting people with applications.

Robin Tousey Ayers went back to the issue of a local Advocacy Institute and stimulated further discussion about that topic.

Dana Canevari talked about her job search and the discrimination she felt she was encountering in the process.

Linda Reeder said she didn't have the statistics in front of her but thought that about 20% of the low-income population in New Haven had mobility impairments and asked whether HANH would raise its number of wheelchair accessible units from 10% to 20% to meet the need. Since Section 8 units account for much of the subsidized housing available and far fewer than 10% of Section 8 units are accessible, it seemed that demand for accessible public housing was not being met. William Heinrichs replied that the HANH does hold the line at 10%, but all of the units have an accessible route.

Matt Ranelli asked if HANH had ever attempted to quantify the additional construction cost for accessible units and if not suggested that doing so would allow HANH to make an informed decision regarding whether to go beyond the 10 percent requirement. He also commented that going beyond the 10 percent requirement may allow HANH to better serve its clients. William Heinrichs said that reports are in square feet, not costs per units.

Elaine Quinn asked about what number of Section 8 vouchers they administer and the answer is 3,133 vouchers. There was some further discussion about needing more accessible units to come from the private sector, although old housing stock often has challenges to accessibility. Linda Reeder said it can be more cost effective to make a greater percentage of new units accessible rather than converting old units, and hoped the HANH would consider this in their construction projects.

There was a motion to adjourn the meeting which was seconded and unanimously approved.