

Housing Issues in Norwalk

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Foreword

The Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison is pleased to be able to apply part of its efforts to improving health in Wisconsin communities. Each year, in one of its graduate courses, the La Follette School randomly selects several communities from around the state and conducts research to identify important health issues and to work with community leaders to design ways of addressing those issues.

The Wisconsin legislature established the Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs in 1984 with a multifaceted mission—to engage in instruction, research, and outreach. The La Follette School fulfills this mission by offering a master's degree in public policy; by encouraging scholarly research on numerous issues that have public policy implications; and by offering numerous enrichment and training opportunities to policy makers at all levels of government.

The School's Center for State, Local and Tribal Governance has contributed to that commitment by establishing an annual program geared toward assisting Wisconsin communities in addressing community health issues. The program is the centerpiece of the Skornicka Seminars at the La Follette School, initiated with support from Joel Skornicka to improve local governance in the state. Joel Skornicka is a former mayor of Madison and assistant to UW chancellors.

The format of these seminars is that students at the La Follette School enroll in a course that provides them with an opportunity to conduct field research and to learn facilitation skills in community development. The students in the course form teams, and each team focuses on a specific community. Students complete an analysis and present it in a case study, like the one that follows. Then community leaders meet to discuss the findings of the case study and to formulate a way of resolving issues raised in the analysis. The La Follette School is happy to assist in any way it can with the implementation of plans designed at these meetings.

Initially, the focus of these seminars was on the issue of gangs and youth violence. We treated this concern as a health and safety issue. We have broadened the scope of the seminar this year to include other community health issues. This expansion is not because gangs and youth violence are no longer matters of concern, but rather to recognize that communities face a variety of health issues. We want to be responsive to the needs and priorities of the people of Wisconsin.

On behalf of the students, faculty and staff at La Follette, I would like to acknowledge and thank the many individuals who have made these studies possible. We appreciate the time and the information that you have contributed. Our hope is that you find our work useful in enhancing the health of the people in our state.

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Executive Summary

The Village of Norwalk has recently experienced significant demographic changes. Prior to the early 1990s the village was predominantly Anglo, and most village residents had been living in the area their entire lives. The Valley Pride meat packing plant, the village's largest employer, had exceptionally high production, which created a significant need for labor that drew Hispanic immigrants to Norwalk. This influx of immigrants resulted in a population shift that has challenged the community in many ways. Though the Hispanic population is now integrated into the community, many village residents report on-going and, in their view, questionable treatment of Hispanic renters, in particular.

We researched the community of Norwalk from January to April, spending several days visiting community leaders in the area and interviewing others by phone. We were initially interested in health of the Hispanic community in Norwalk, and, in particular, possible work-related health issues for those Hispanic people working at Valley Pride. After several visits, the focus of our research shifted to an issue mentioned by every person we interviewed: housing. During our interviews, several other health issues were also noted: 1) Lack of health/dental insurance, 2) Low levels of pre-natal care, 3) Type II diabetes, 4) Undiagnosed mental illness, 5) Tuberculosis, 6) Alcoholism, and 7) Domestic violence. Although these issues are important, none dominated our discussions as much as housing issues, and especially the treatment of Hispanic tenants.

In addition to the housing issues Hispanic residents face, many community members note two additional problems related to housing: substandard housing conditions and the related potential threat of lead poisoning. Nearly everyone we spoke with described their concern regarding specific situations where Hispanic residents lived in substandard housing or had problems with their landlords. Despite broad awareness of this treatment, community members expressed frustration because of their inability to address these problems. Hispanic residents were extremely hesitant to describe their own experiences, yet they did confirm and expand on our understanding of this issue.

Village officials are aware of and have tried to address the housing problems, yet these efforts have not resolved the housing problems, had tried in the past to fix the problem by hiring an inspector, but this did not work. As part of our research, we contacted several county and state officials, as well as nonprofit agencies to find out more about the rights of both tenants and landlords and about possible alternatives to address this problem.

This paper provides a brief history of Norwalk, followed by a description of the current climate, other health issues, and the housing problems. This paper will serve as the basis for a community meeting to be held in Norwalk that will include several state, county and village officials. The focus of this meeting is to discuss proposals to address the housing problem. Each person invited to the meeting has a stake in the community and provides valuable information to help address the housing problems. After the meeting, we will expand this paper to include a section summarizing the community discussion and the resulting proposals.

Housing Issues in Norwalk

by Ceri Jenkins, Rochelle Mallett, and Peter Tempelis

In January 2003, we began our research on community health issues in the Village of Norwalk, a small community in Monroe County, in western Wisconsin, fourteen miles southeast of Sparta, the county's seat. From January through April, we interviewed many residents of the community, including renters, landlords, health care providers, and government officials from the village, county and state. Housing emerged as a key issue that affects the health of the Norwalk community.

Although Norwalk is in a rural area, it has a diverse population, similar to larger cities in the region. Norwalk's population of 647 includes people of German, Scandinavian, and, more recently, residents of Hispanic descent. In addition, there is a large Amish population just outside the village limits. Norwalk's major employer, Valley Pride Packing Inc. is a meat processing and packing facility that lies on the outskirts of town. Valley Pride's presence in Norwalk greatly affects the economic well-being of the town's residents, including the Hispanic workers who recently established permanent residence in the village and surrounding area. Norwalk is a well-known stop along the famous Elroy-Sparta Bike Trail, which attracts tourists and outdoor enthusiasts from across the country.

History

Norwalk began as a small railroad town settled mainly by German-Catholic and Scandinavian-Lutheran immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The town remained prosperous throughout its early years as a stop along a major east-west railway line. It was an economic center for farmers and residents, with thriving businesses including restaurants, taverns, grocery stores, clothing stores, an implement store, a hardware store, and a creamery. In the mid-1900s, a meat packing plant opened approximately one half-mile outside of Norwalk, creating yet another major business in the areas.

By the end of the twentieth century, farming was less profitable, the railway line was abandoned, and many descendants of the early settlers left for the cities of the Midwest. As people gradually left the area, some of the businesses on Main Street were forced to close. While few businesses survived the exodus, the meat packing plant, an implement store, a grocery store, and The Place, a tavern in town, all continued to thrive. The conversion of the railway line to a bike trail provided some tourism income for the area but was insufficient as a major revenue source.

As labor became increasingly scarce, Valley Pride began to hire workers from abroad. From 1989 to 1992, the plant hired workers from Eastern Europe, especially Poland and the former Czechoslovakia. Norwalk residents commented that these workers kept mainly to themselves and, after only a few years living in Norwalk, they left for the cities. At that point, the plant began to hire Hispanic workers from Mexico and other

Latin American countries. The new workers were mainly young men who sought to earn money to send back to their families in their home countries.

According to many current residents, the transition for this new population of young, Latino men to small town America proved to be challenging. After working long hours in tough conditions at the meat packing plant, the men frequently gathered for parties at their homes. Some social gatherings resulted in drunkenness and unruly behavior. Other residents noted that several local women often attended the parties. The noise and drinking associated with these parties concerned some residents at the time, in particular the older, retired people, of which Norwalk is largely composed.

While parties and drinking are common among young, single men, it was difficult for village residents to address their specific concerns because of the cultural and language barriers between the established residents and the immigrants. Consequently, the police and other authorities, including the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), frequently appeared to address problematic situations. These situations ended poorly for some Hispanic workers, who were sent back to their homeland because of their undocumented status.

In addition to reported transitional problems within the community, the Hispanic workers experienced daily the difficult and often brutal conditions of working in a meat packing plant. Wages in the industry are typically low, and the risk of danger is quite high: Workers must deal with the sharp blades for boning and cutting meat, the heat and blood of the killing floor, and the freezing temperatures of the refrigeration unit where carcasses are stored. Often even seasoned laborers start at just above minimum wage with few fringe benefits. At the height of the killing season, workers put in long days, often working more than eight hours.

One health professional estimated that at one point, over half the population of Hispanic workers at Valley Pride lacked proper legal documentation for residing and/or working in the United States. According to a former pastor in the community, undocumented immigrants in Norwalk lived in constant fear of being discovered by the INS in the late 1990s. Immigration-related raids generally resulted in the arrested individuals being deported. On one occasion, the INS raided a Bible study attended by Hispanic residents, arresting the pastor who led the study. Residents discussed another incident in which, after a bar fight involving Hispanic men, the INS went to the homes of Hispanic residents who had not even entered the bar that evening. Hispanic workers, particularly undocumented workers, found themselves in a tough position, facing fear both at their place of employment and in their homes. During the mid-1990s, the combination of these factors – harsh working conditions, low pay, and fear of deportation – resulted in an extremely high worker turnover, what a county Extension worker called “a river” of people flowing through the village.

In 1996, community leaders, members of the religious community, and the University of Wisconsin–Extension started an organization called Amigos de la Comunidad/Friends of the Community,¹ to address issues related to high turnover in the community and to try to stabilize the Hispanic population. The leadership hoped to create

¹ We will refer to this organization as Norwalk residents refer to it, “Amigos.”

a vehicle to overcome the cultural and language barriers that existed in the past between long-time residents, Hispanic residents, and the plant. They believed that building relationships and improving communication were ultimately the keys to solving the more complex problems relating to housing, employment, health, safety, education, and recreation.

By the new millennium, Amigos had made its vision a near reality. The organization met frequently and had high turnout from all sectors of the community to discuss and address issues related to the new population. With the help of translators, the cultural and language differences that plagued the community only a few years earlier became a source of strength for the community. Hispanic and non-Hispanic community members were noticeably more comfortable and friendly around one another. Former Amigos members describe how, through their communication and broad collaboration efforts, the organization successfully slowed the trend in worker turnover. With increasing employment and financial security, many of the Hispanic workers began to settle down and marry, either women back home or women from the area, and started families. At the same time, businesses along Main Street enjoyed increased patronage because of the increasing number of families in the area.

Amigos made significant headway on issues by building community, helping the Hispanic population settle permanently in Norwalk, and creating a climate of understanding in the community. With support from the plant, Amigos established a Thanksgiving dinner attended by all community members. It was not unlikely to find a long-time Norwalk resident sipping coffee in the new Mexican restaurant that had opened on Main Street in the early morning hours. The town enjoyed the fruits of its diversity and its renewed sense of community.

In August 2001, Amigos suffered setbacks in their community development efforts when Valley Pride closed after it filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy status. The sudden closing of the plant greatly affected the entire community, from the farmers who relied on the plant to cull their cows to the restaurants that depended on plant employees for business. The plant's closing left many, especially those in the Hispanic community, without income or accessible job opportunities. Many Hispanic workers uprooted their families and moved to other areas of the state and country to find work. Some Hispanic residents found jobs in other industries, including dairy farming and manufacturing, and remained in the Norwalk community. The plant's closing devastated the community's growth and vitality, which was jumpstarted initially by the influx of Hispanic immigrants less than a decade earlier.

When the plant reopened in late 2001, it employed a workforce estimated at 80 Hispanic laborers and 20 management level employees, whereas prior to the closing it had employed approximately 300 laborers and 30 management-level employees.

Current Climate

Today the Village of Norwalk hangs in a tenuous balance. Relations between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic residents are improving, yet there continues to be a strong division between the two populations. On the surface, the community maintains a quiet, small town atmosphere. The streets are clean and noiseless, even during one recent visit on a Friday evening. The local restaurants serve fish fries, while many Hispanic residents

gather for a Friday night Bible study. Under this quiet, however, exist fear and uncertainty that few in the community discuss openly.

The Hispanic population has morphed from the days when the plant was at higher production levels. Families are now predominant, in contrast to the earlier immigration period when only single men were in the area. The growth in the population of Hispanic children in the Norwalk-Wilton-Ontario school district provides evidence of this trend: This year 61 Hispanic students are in school, out of 719 total students, according to the district superintendent. This change in the population dynamic from single men to families brought a quieter atmosphere for all residents. Village members, both Hispanic and Anglo, note that streets are generally calmer and cleaner, without the former excess of beer bottles and cans.

The rest of the village is much like any other small town in Wisconsin. The village clerk estimates that 30 percent of the population is retired. Many families we spoke with have children who remain in the area, though it appears that many young people leave Norwalk for surrounding communities or nearby cities.

The plant continues to operate under Chapter 11; it is still producing, and continues to employ an estimated 100 workers, according to residents. News articles report that the plant is up for sale and the owner, Rick Stewart, claims that the plant will not shut down, even if it is not sold. From the outside, it seems that the plant has recovered from its financial problems. Officials comment that though the plant violated several Department of Natural Resources (DNR) regulations in the 1990s, the plant has addressed these problems. Residents do not seem concerned about pollution from the plant. Community members comment that the odor from the plant has lessened, and that work-related injuries seem to have decreased since the reopening.

Very few community members seem to be aware of current conditions at the plant, which represents a change from prior years where the plant participated in Amigos meetings and advocates sought to address plant-related issues. Residents, both Hispanic and Anglo, rarely mention the plant. Although we attempted to discuss the plant with many residents, few seem to know anyone who works there.

A visit to the local bar, The Place, provides an excellent snapshot of life in Norwalk. At 4:00 in the afternoon on a Wednesday, the bar is fairly busy. At the front end of the long bar sits a variety of community members, all Anglo. At the back end of the bar sits one Hispanic man, quietly drinking his beer. The bartender, Cobb, is extremely friendly and knowledgeable about the community. He informs us that both the Hispanic man and one of the men at the front are managers at the plant. These two men work together, though they do not share an after-work drink together. There is no apparent conflict, yet there appears to be a social division.

The Amigos group is still active; they meet the first Thursday of every month at noon to have lunch and discuss issues in the community. Some members of Amigos and other community leaders have noted that the group lost much of its focus recently and now serves primarily as a forum for discussion. Although Valley Pride no longer helps to support it financially, Amigos still holds the Thanksgiving Dinner. Many residents point out the festival as a significant, positive community event. Amigos does not, however, tackle the critical issues many of the Latino community members face. Amigos' lack of

focus may worsen with the upcoming departure of Pastor Adrian Rayo, the group's key link to the Hispanic community.

Driving through town, it is apparent that the economy of Norwalk has suffered from the plant's Chapter 11 status and decreased production. Many businesses have closed, leaving Lehner's Market, a Mexican grocery store, two restaurants, and two bars. Besides Valley Pride, two main businesses operate, Degenhart Implement and Degenhart Tires. According to the village clerk, these businesses employ mostly family members from the community.

Norwalk is a village of two communities, Hispanic and Anglo. They exist separately in Norwalk, with a few exceptions, such as the annual Thanksgiving dinner. The Anglo population no longer seems worried or concerned about the Hispanic population. Residents report that it has been several years since the last INS raid. Hispanic residents note that the community is very safe and peaceful, more so than other towns where they have lived in the United States.

Health Issues

Prior to discussing the housing issue that we suggest is a key concern of the Norwalk community, we summarize the other health issues raised in our discussions with members of the community. The Monroe County Community Health Needs Assessment, completed by the Monroe County Department of Health in 2002, also provides a countywide view of health concerns. Although the assessment does not indicate specific data for the Village of Norwalk, it does provide significant data for the county. Many of the health concerns indicated in this study are applicable to Norwalk.

Lack of Health/Dental Insurance

The high cost of health insurance is a problem in the Village of Norwalk, especially for low-income families. The Scenic Bluffs Community Health Center provides primary health care and prescriptions for the community. Scenic Bluffs also has a gymnasium and kitchen that community residents use for exercise, community meals, team events, and group meetings. Scenic Bluffs offers the Healthy Neighbors Plan, which provides health care on a sliding fee scale based on income and family size. Though Scenic Bluffs provides care for many people, the center does not have the funding to meet all the community's needs. Some Hispanic immigrants utilize the free clinic one night per week offered at St. Clare's Health Mission in Sparta.

Hispanic immigrants may fear formal health care because they are wary of completing the required documents, believing that documentation may be shared with immigration officials. The director of a health center indicated that discontinuity of care is a major barrier to effective treatment. Many Hispanic individuals, in particular, do not seek care until they experience serious symptoms. In addition, because of the high costs, much of the Hispanic population often seeks care only when they need it, as opposed to receiving preventive care. Undocumented workers, in particular, may be afraid of possible INS involvement if they accept health insurance or Medicaid. Some people we interviewed report that Hispanic workers decline insurance coverage available through their employer because of the high premiums and their need to save money to send to relatives in Mexico. One health professional stated that the plant, in some cases,

reimburse providers directly for work-related injuries, but we did not obtain specific data related to worker's compensation claims from the plant.

Dental care is an even larger problem than health coverage, described as a "bottomless pit of need" by a health care provider, especially for low-income families, particularly Hispanic families. The Scenic Bluffs Clinic provides dental care in their nearby Cashton clinic but not at the Norwalk location.

Prenatal Care

According to the County Health Needs Assessment, Monroe County, as a whole, did not perform well in terms of infant mortality rates in comparison to other counties. Currently the infant mortality rate for Monroe County is 11.3 per 1,000 live births, while other similar counties have a range of 4.4-11.2 per 1,000 live births. The county health officer indicated that teen pregnancy is not a significant problem in Norwalk, compared with the rest of the county. Health providers noted that prenatal care among Hispanic women often begins later than among the general population and that Hispanic families, in general, are larger than Anglo families in the area. One health provider noted that many Hispanic women do not receive sufficient prenatal care, in part because of the cost, lack of awareness of available services, and a hesitancy to access obstetrical care in another culture.

Tuberculosis

Monroe County had its first active tuberculosis (TB) case in 2002, but this case was not in Norwalk. Tuberculosis potentially poses a threat when immigrants move from highly endemic areas into a new community. The county health inspector described a successful initiative between the Health Department, Viterbo College, and Valley Pride to test all new plant employees for tuberculosis. This program, which operated during the plant's high production years, aimed at screening all those who had never received a TB test, with a special focus on immigrants who relocated to Norwalk from endemic areas.

Domestic Violence

Monroe County's domestic violence rates are higher than the state averages for 1997 and 1998. Exact numbers for Norwalk are not known, but residents commented that domestic violence is a problem in the community. Pastor Adrian Rayo noted that domestic violence laws and customs are different in Latin American countries and there are often fewer protections against it. Thus it is possible that some Hispanic women in Norwalk experience violence in the home. Pastor Rayo seeks to educate immigrant men about the differences in the laws and the need to avoid domestic violence. Rayo notes that some Hispanic community members now report injuries sustained by women, such as black eyes.

Type II Diabetes

Forty percent of the adults in Monroe County were reported as overweight in the period from 1993 to 1998. This is the highest percentage reported in all of Wisconsin. This poses an exceptionally high risk for Type II diabetes, which is caused, in part, by obesity and lifestyle factors related to obesity. In these same years 4 percent of the population over the age of 18 in the six-county area of Monroe, Buffalo, Jackson, La Crosse, Pepin and Trempealeau Counties were told by a doctor that they had diabetes.

Mental Health

One health provider estimates that nearly half of all primary care visits to the Scenic Bluffs Clinic involve mental health, though perhaps only half of those are diagnosed. Depression is the biggest mental health problem. Intervention in these cases is not always possible with one visit, and psychiatric care is not widely available. Extended care is not typical yet may be necessary. Psychiatrists are in short supply and often cannot get reimbursements.

Alcoholism

The health officials in Norwalk, as well as several residents, indicated that alcohol is the drug that causes the most problems in Norwalk. Although alcoholism is not the leading diagnosis in health care problems, alcohol-related diseases are prevalent. Alcohol use increases depression and cardiovascular disease, which the health center reports are prevalent in Norwalk. Several community members described separate incidents of drunk driving that resulted in deaths or injuries. Health officials report that the problem of alcoholism is so pervasive that most community members do not view alcohol as problematic.

Housing Issues

Every person we interviewed throughout our research in Norwalk discussed the critical housing issues in the village. There is a high level of discussion and awareness concerning housing issues, yet it appears that resources for addressing the problem effectively are limited. The housing issues fall into three primary areas: substandard housing conditions, treatment of Hispanic tenants, and lack of awareness or identification of potential lead poisoning.

The Village of Norwalk has extensive ordinances related to housing issues, yet a number of officials told us that little or no enforcement of these ordinances occurs. The village ordinance on housing, Chapter 19, establishes minimum standards for all housing, including rental units. This chapter covers requirements for landlords to maintain the interior and exterior of the home at a minimum standard and to rent clean and sanitary units. Chapter 19 also covers requirements and responsibilities for tenants, such as appropriate trash disposal and hanging storm windows. This chapter also establishes the responsibilities of owners and occupants, the penalties for code violations, and the appeal procedures for recipients of penalties.

Chapter 19 requires that owners or renters apply for a rooming house permit if they rent a portion of their housing to three or more unrelated persons (not husband or wife, son or daughter, mother or father, or sister or brother of the owner or operator). The law requires residents to obtain both a rooming permit and an occupancy report card noting the maximum number of persons allowed to reside in the unit.

Substandard Housing

Village staff, landlords, residents, and school officials noted their concern for the substandard condition of much of the housing in Norwalk. This problem affects all residents of the community. That is, some residents and village officials are concerned that the poor appearance of housing stock could negatively impact the value of the

community and could affect tourism, particularly as bicyclists pass through the community on the Elroy-Sparta State Trail. In addition to the visual impact, the substandard housing affects prospective renters, mainly families, who face a limited selection of high quality, well-maintained housing. The village clerk estimates that more than 80 of the 200 housing units in Norwalk are rentals, so the quality of the rental housing stock affects a large portion of the community.

Some of the people we interviewed described their belief that the condition of the housing is closely linked to the condition of the community. The village clerk described the small town feeling of Norwalk in years past, and said that this feeling has largely eroded as community residents no longer have a shared history.

A representative from the Monroe County Housing Authority who has worked in Norwalk commented that the housing stock is in terrible condition but that landlords “don’t like to be told what to do.” This person inspects homes as part of the federal Section 8 rental voucher program, and noted that currently Norwalk has one of the 132 vouchers in Monroe County. The poor condition of the housing contributes to this low usage, as the Housing Authority must inspect and approve housing before approving vouchers.

Several community members noted that the village board has attempted to address the condition of the housing stock, without success. The village clerk described a previous effort to hire and maintain a housing inspector to enforce the village housing ordinances. The village hired a part-time inspector from outside of the community, as no one from Norwalk applied for the position. There were reports that landlords refused to comply with the inspector’s recommendations, resulting in the housing ordinances not being enforced. Since the departure of the part-time inspector, the position has remained vacant.

Treatment of Hispanic Tenants

Many community leaders and residents, in particular, expressed grave concern regarding the treatment of Hispanic renters. Some landlords have become physically violent with Hispanic tenants, according to our sources, refusing to make basic repairs in vacant dwellings and telling applicants to “take [the apartment] or leave it, as is”; denying tenants repairs that the law requires landlords to make; charging tenants for repairs that are the landlord’s responsibility; violating the conditions of verbal leases by increasing rent amounts each month; and charging tenants for water and utility usage that occurred prior to their tenancy. Problems are compounded by the low level of English fluency among the Hispanic population in Norwalk and a breakdown in communication between some Hispanic tenants and landlords.

Our sources also stated that another problem is that members of the Hispanic community are unaware of their rights as tenants and that resources for communicating and defending such rights are scarce. A housing authority representative stated that there is no basic knowledge of rental rights, and that this is common in rural areas such as Norwalk. After learning of some illegal landlord behavior, such as “changing tenants’ locks and putting their belongings in the street,” this representative worked with Norwalk community members to collect and provide information and brochures on tenants’ rights. Though several brochures describe the state law on tenants’ rights in both English and

Spanish, it may be useful to provide a bilingual brochure that summarizes all laws applicable to Norwalk.

The undocumented status of many Hispanic residents affects their ability to obtain housing because many Norwalk landlords require documentation that applicants do not possess or are too wary to provide. The percentage of undocumented Hispanic residents in Norwalk is unknown, though several officials estimate it at least 50 percent. Although some undocumented Hispanic people obtain housing by living with friends or other immigrants who “have papers,” many families and renters do not have this option. Families feel they have to rent from landlords who do not require formal applications and in general do not use written leases. Oral leases are mutually desirable: the undocumented worker wants no paperwork, and landlords like the built-in flexibility. According to Chapter 704.01 (1) of the Wisconsin Statutes, “‘Lease’ means an agreement, whether oral or written, for transfer of possession of real property . . . for a definite period of time.”

According to Wisconsin statutes, landlords may establish their own procedures for selecting tenants, provided they apply the chosen procedure equally to all applicants. For example, landlords may not require some tenants but not others to provide Social Security cards. Landlords may, however, modify their standards or allow applicants to provide alternative types of documentation in the application process. For instance, they may require photo identification but it can be in the form of a passport, birth certificate, or driver’s license. Landlords may reduce or eliminate any of their requirements, provided they treat all applicants equally. Regardless of the information collected during the application process, and whether the landlord uses an oral or written lease, the lease is binding, and both landlords and tenants are subject to the provisions in the lease.

We have heard accounts of landlord violations of verbal leases. Many accounts cite one landlord, in particular, who rents to undocumented Hispanic people and uses verbal leases. This landlord has allegedly violated verbal contracts in several ways. For example, after establishing the rent amount, this person has reportedly required the family to pay an increased rent each month. In addition, this landlord has reportedly required residents to pay for their own repairs, though law requires the landlord to pay for them and has sometimes refused to make repairs at all. According to some accounts, Hispanic residents no longer call their landlord with maintenance problems (something as serious as water leaking through the ceiling) for fear of having to pay for expensive repairs.

Several residents, primarily non-Hispanic people, voiced concerns regarding treatment of Hispanic residents and frustration and inability to address them publicly. According to the founding members of the Amigos group, church leaders and others formed the group to address housing and other issues (such as health, education, and recreation). Amigos sometimes offered translation for landlords and tenants, and one pastor’s daughter provided translation to assist the village officials. Amigos members decided, however, not to address housing issues by constructing new housing because this would have been very complicated, financially risky, and there was some uncertainty in the community about the permanency of the new immigrant population (particularly as Valley Pride faced financial difficulties).

Although Amigos has had exceptional success in forming community awareness and understanding of the new immigrant population, there is still a critical need for

advocacy for the Hispanic population. Pastor Adrian Rayo, of the Harvest Evangelical Free Church, has served as an active advocate and translator for much of the Hispanic community and has earned much respect in Norwalk. Yet the Hispanic community has a large unmet need for additional advocacy resources to address the complex, intense problems that confront Hispanics in Norwalk. Centro Hispano of Dane County has addressed similar issues in the Madison area but is not able to provide services outside Dane County. United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS) provides services and advocacy in much of the state, but has no staff in Monroe County. A former Amigos member notes that a UMOS representative previously attended Amigos meetings, so perhaps Amigos could request that UMOS participate and help supply additional advocacy in Norwalk.

Amigos members continue to struggle with the issue in treatment of Hispanic tenants; it has been the focus of several recent monthly meetings—though no formal solutions have been proposed. It is clear that a housing inspector would provide, at a minimum, an objective party to enforce ordinances and improve conditions in terms of required housing repair. This may ease tension by improving housing conditions, yet it may also result in increased rent for tenants. In addition, an inspector may find violations among Hispanic tenants, such as surpassing the occupancy limit or lacking a rooming permit, because Hispanic tenants may have large families and/or unrelated people residing in their apartment. Some say that landlords in Norwalk have allowed this practice, in part because it serves the interest of both landlords and tenants to have stable families renting. A housing inspector, though, may require that tenants abide to the maximum occupancy limit, which could ultimately increase the rent for Hispanic families or result in their move to a new community.

A former church leader suggested some of these problems would lessen if more Hispanic residents learned English. Though this may decrease some problems, such as a lack of understanding of certain laws, it is unlikely that learning English will address the issues described here, particularly for undocumented immigrants.

The housing authority staff person noted that immigrants who have a Social Security card may be eligible for a Section 8 voucher. Though this may improve housing conditions for some Hispanic residents, it would not address the issues faced by the undocumented population.

Potential threat of lead poisoning

According to those we interviewed, many families with young children are unaware of the threat of lead poisoning and may not have access to free testing. No Norwalk agency currently enforces the requirement that landlords remove lead-based paint, though Monroe County and the U.S. EPA could pursue enforcement.

Most of the housing stock in Norwalk was constructed prior to 1978 and thus most likely has lead-based paint, which increases the risk of lead poisoning for children, especially. County health officials noted that they have completed inspections in Norwalk for families with children who receive Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and that families not receiving Medicaid or WIC could obtain free testing, funded by a grant. The free testing is advertised regularly through public notices in local papers. Federal and state laws require that all children on Medicaid or WIC receive a blood test for lead

poisoning at age 12 months and 24 months. Federal law does not, however, require any follow-up if an inspection shows elevated levels of lead in the home. The state lead poisoning prevention program does not have the responsibility for enforcing follow-up, but the county health department could provide enforcement, according to Section 254.59 of the state statutes. This states that counties may designate a property as a “human health hazard” and determine that it is uninhabitable because of a high risk of lead poisoning. A representative from the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) notes that several counties have used this provision to enforce lead-based paint removal. According to Health Department staff, Monroe County has utilized this provision to provide enforcement. Health Department staff follow-up with landlords after testing, and if a landlord is not compliant, they pursue the “human health hazard” determination. In addition, the village housing inspector could be involved in addressing lead-based paint issues by working with the county to follow up on findings of contamination.

Federal law requires that landlords and sellers disclose known information on lead-based paint in the home, and they must also provide the “Protect Your Family From Lead In Your Home” brochure. Landlords should document the disclosure and have tenants confirm that the landlord informed them appropriately. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sometimes pursues enforcement in cases where landlords did not disclose information, and where there is a health problem, such as a lead-poisoned child. A representative from the state DHFS lead prevention program explained that the EPA enforcement is effective because EPA requires landlords to remove lead-based paint from all of their properties. This may reduce the overall threat in the community by protecting children in multiple properties.

Recommendations

On Tuesday, May 6, 2003 various community leaders, members and various state workers met to discuss the housing problems in Norwalk. Through a nominal group process the members of the meeting identified nine methods to improve the either the problem of sub-standard housing or the treatment of Hispanic renters. The group produced the following options: 1.) Landlord/Tenant education, 2.) Grants/Incentives, 3.) Hire a building inspector, 3.) Establish a tenant’s council, 4.) Outreach to the Hispanic population, 5.) Provide a safe method for renters to address concerns, 6.) Group organization to construct/buy houses to rent, 7.) Utilize Americorps volunteers for a specific housing improvement project, 8.) Strengthen existing ordinances. After discussing these nine methods, the group decided the first three listed were the most important.

I. Landlord/Tenant Education

This recommendation would involve several groups including the Housing Authority, Amigos, Families First and possibly Valley Pride Packaging Plant. The group thought that landlords and tenants should be provided with information separately and in different forms of communication. It was discussed that a mix of verbal and communication would work better for tenants since the literacy of the Hispanic residents is often unknown. Pastor Rayo suggested that the best way to discuss tenant rights would be to provide an information session for Hispanic tenant’s after the various church services in Norwalk. Other members of the group also thought a bilingual brochure

would be helpful for both parties. A member of the Village Board pointed out that the same method would not work for landlord's and suggested that an official letter informing landlord's of their rights and the right's of tenants be used.

II. Grants for Collaborative Groups

The Village Board has recently created a community development committee. A member of this committee was present at the meeting and suggested this method in collaboration with the Amigos group. The Village Clerk mentioned that this was tried in the past and did not work. The group decided that there were several possibilities to increase the effectiveness of these assets. First it was suggested that a survey be sent to landlords in order to determine interest in a grant. Second, a block-grant board could be created in order to alleviate some of the work from the Village Clerk. Third, Dr. Dennis Dresang suggested that a LaFollette student could help write and implement a grant.

III. Hiring a Village Inspector/Increasing Effectiveness of Chapter 19

As mentioned throughout this report the Village has rather extensive ordinances on housing, yet they are not enforced. It was suggested that a new building inspector be hired and possibly shared with another community to defer some of the cost. Along with this step, a Village Board member suggested that the ordinances be re-written to better fit Norwalk. Also it was suggested that the police should help enforce these ordinances rather than just focusing on traffic violations. A member of the community development board suggested that these were methods the board could investigate and possibly implement.

Conclusion

The meeting on May 6th succeeded in bringing together various community leaders, members and various state workers to discuss Norwalk's housing issues, specifically relating to sub-standard housing and the treatment of Hispanic renters. The meeting resulted in three major policy recommendations: 1.) Landlord/Tenant Education, 2.) Grants for Collaborative Groups, and 3.) Hiring a Village Inspector/Increasing Effectiveness of Chapter 19. The village and its leadership plan to review the report and subsequent policy recommendations to determine how such proposals could be implemented to most effectively address the problems. The La Follette School, including its students, faculty, and staff, offered to provide on-going assistance to the village, such as by helping to write grant applications and re-write housing ordinances.

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Appendix I: Meeting Sign-In List

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Amy Zeman

Linda Smith
Monroe County Health Department
(Could use same address as Sharon Nelson)

Adrian Rayo

Pam Lindquist
Scenic Bluffs Community Health Center

Kelly Maluer (?? Really hard to read on the sign-in sheet – use same address as Barb)

Barb Ornes

Karrie Jackelen

Lois Van Tol
Scenic Bluffs Health Center
Box 228
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Jean Bardeen
Families First Monroe Count

Robert Keller
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