

A CLOSER LOOK

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A Closer Look takes topics from previous and current issues of *Bridges* and examines them from a local perspective.

...AT THE LITTLE ROCK REGION

Making ACHANGE in Arkansas

Small CDCs Band Together to Prove There's Strength in Numbers

"Something has to change."

"We have to change the way we do business."

"We need to change to reach scale and sustainability in order to really make a difference in our communities."

These are all comments from representatives of community development corporations (CDCs) that work on affordable housing development in Arkansas.

CDCs that operate in predominantly rural states such as Arkansas are often small and geographically isolated. Individually, their size may prevent them from gaining access to resources they need. However, when small CDCs work together, the outcome can be dramatically different. Take, for example, the story of the Arkansas Coalition of Housing and Neighborhood Growth for Empowerment (ACHANGE). This two-year-old collaborative, representing both urban and rural organizations, has grown into a statewide, unified voice for safe, decent, affordable housing.

The History

In 2004, representatives of seven CDCs located in both urban and rural areas gathered

in Little Rock to discuss challenges facing each organization and to find common ground.

Common themes emerged, such as organizational capacity, continuous struggles for funding, the need for training and a lack of respect for their contribution to communities. Understanding the profound benefits that could be derived from a collective voice, they agreed to form a working group.

The working group identified training as the most pressing need and, as a result, sponsored the 2005 Community Development Training Conference. The event was attended by more than 100 people from across the region and was replicated in 2006.

The training conferences accomplished much more than training and capacity building. NeighborWorks America joined the group soon after its formation and was a partner for the first training event. Its participation enticed other state, regional and national organizations—such as Freddie Mac, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Local Initiative Support Corp., USDA Rural Development, and the Arkansas Development

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"The power in numbers is critical for the work performed by community-based organizations, and it is for this reason: By working with and through ACHANGE, NeighborWorks America is able to provide greater resources to the entire state of Arkansas."

—Marshall Crawford, management consultant
NeighborWorks America

"As a small organization located in a very rural corner of the state, being a part of a larger collaborative helps to give us a stronger voice in working through difficulties and obstacles in our community development activities."

—Joni Canatella, executive director
Chicot County Housing Assistance

"I have been very impressed with the quality of the training ACHANGE brings to our state in their annual training event."

—Hillis Schilds, vice president
Regions Bank

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Finance Authority—to offer support. Each of these organizations has since joined the group. As word of the group's success spread, other CDCs began to ask how they could participate.

The result was the formation of ACHANGE. Its mission is “to serve as a collective voice promoting quality affordable housing and community economic development throughout Arkansas.” ACHANGE accomplishes its mission by supporting education, providing training, encouraging responsible growth and sustainability, and influencing public policy.

In an effort to recognize excellence in the various areas of affordable housing development and to increase awareness of affordable housing needs in the state, ACHANGE held its first Community Development Service Awards on June 13, 2006, in conjunction with National Homeownership Month. To a packed house, the group debuted the *Making ACHANGE in Arkansas* video, which highlights affordable housing needs and successes in the state and strives to put a face on the challenges the organizations face.

The only criterion for becoming a member of ACHANGE is the desire to assist in the creation of safe, decent, affordable housing in Arkansas. The entire group meets once a month at the Little Rock Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Subcommittees meet at various locations on a monthly basis.

Creating an Avenue for Investment

Individually, there is no question ACHANGE members make a difference in their community. Working together, the groups can reach a scale that makes an investment

tool, such as a statewide loan fund, feasible. A statewide loan fund to be used by qualified developers to finance property acquisition for affordable housing will help ACHANGE organizations take on larger projects and produce more housing. Achieving this scale also makes the projects

workshops, home-buyer education and housing-counseling certification programs, and strategic alliances with additional partners.

As part of the 2006 Community Development Training, ACHANGE members voted to focus on the following during 2007:

“I believe it is going to take groups such as ACHANGE to bring attention and energy to addressing the problem of quality affordable housing in our urban, and especially our rural, communities.”

—Martie North, director of community development Bank of the Ozarks

large enough for national philanthropic and housing support organizations to provide funding.

ACHANGE members are discussing collaboration on a “green” building project and a construction cooperative.

“Green” building projects use environmentally friendly materials and construction techniques. The resulting projects are more energy-efficient and are believed to provide a healthier living environment. The proposed affordable housing project would be a model for financing and construction techniques that could be used by local CDCs.

The construction cooperative would enable the CDCs to purchase construction materials in bulk or to take donations of materials they have previously turned away due to lack of storage.

Shaping the Future of Affordable Housing

ACHANGE has high expectations for the future, including continuation of the annual conference, regional

the topic for policy makers across the state.

- 3) Individual development accounts (IDAs)—Some of the ACHANGE organizations offer IDAs. As a result of relationships built through ACHANGE, providers have expanded their reach to previously underserved areas. ACHANGE will promote IDAs by replicating these types of partnerships. It will also help expand IDA programs throughout the state.
- 4) Community Development Service Awards—The awards program will be an annual event.
- 5) Standards for home-buyer counseling and education—ACHANGE will develop training requirements, standards and audit procedures to create a certification program for organizations offering home-buyer counseling and education.
- 6) Regional workshops—ACHANGE will conduct regional workshops in each of the four corners of the state to provide additional training opportunities in the more remote areas.

For more information on ACHANGE, contact Teddy Gardner at 870-230-1717 or visit the ACHANGE web site at www.makingachange.us.

- 1) Creation of a housing trust fund for the state of Arkansas—The group's Public Policy Committee actively participates in meetings on the topic with the Arkansas Supportive Housing Network, Arkansas Development Finance Authority and the Department of Health and Human Services.
- 2) Creation of a land bank and the revision of state quiet title statutes—Members agreed to join the current land bank working group, which is composed primarily of representatives from urban areas. ACHANGE participation broadens the support base for the project, and members will serve as an education medium on



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