

A Safety Net for the District's Poor

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As a nation we have made great strides in understanding poverty. Yet some Americans still believe that if able-bodied adults want to change their situation badly enough, they can—and should.

But to climb out of poverty, people often need job training and a support system that includes child care and safe, decent, affordable housing. This country's spending priorities do not include providing more affordable housing and community services in any sustainable, large-scale way. This is unfortunate, because when housing and services are available, they can make a dramatic change in people's incomes.

Take the people who live in or near the Northeast Washington mixed-income housing complex called Edgewood Terrace.

In the mid-1980s, Edgewood Terrace was nicknamed "Little Beirut" because of the violence and crime there. An open-air crack market operated on the complex's plaza, and dealers used vacant apartments as hideouts. Children went to school without baths, because the showers didn't work. Residents' incomes came mostly from welfare and other government subsidies.

Then, in 1995, the federal government invested \$30 million in a new nonprofit developer, the Community Preservation Development Corp., to turn the housing complex around. That was enough to leverage another \$40 million in private and public money to renovate the housing and integrate job training, child care and after-school programs into the lives of the residents.

It worked.

The average income of 125 Edgewood Terrace residents before job training in 1995 was \$9,400. By this year incomes had shot up to \$26,800 on average. Gains were similar for 435 adults who lived near Edgewood Terrace and participated in the program. They increased their incomes from \$11,000 to \$25,000 on average.

Pat Fisher, 29, and Lisa Jones, 39, both Edgewood Terrace residents and graduates of the job-training program, tripled their incomes -- from about \$9,000 a year to more than \$25,000. The two mothers, who have children at home, said they could not have gone through the training without the support available at Edgewood Terrace.

Crime rates, drug trafficking and violence are way down at Edgewood Terrace -- so much so that the complex, once considered housing of last resort, now attracts higher-income families as tenants. Today, families earning \$10,000 live next door to families earning \$70,000.

The income growth at Edgewood Terrace proves that a well-planned, mixed-income development creates a stable environment that creates more job opportunities for lower-income families. Edgewood Terrace also demonstrates that stability is critical to changing people's lives and the neighborhoods in which they live. This is a success story that we should be replicating across the country.

If we are unwilling to offer Edgewood Terrace-style support for our nation's poor, it will be difficult -- if not impossible -- for them to climb out of poverty on their own. If we as a nation want to change this situation, Edgewood Terrace shows us we can -- and that we should.

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