

2020



PT PARTNERS

ANTI-OPPRESSION TASK FORCE

PREPARED BY:

The Task Force

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Position Statement

PT Partners (PTP), a grassroots, resident-led, community organizing non-profit, aims to rebuild community in PT Barnum Apartments, a low-income public housing development; to develop partnerships with community leaders and organizations; and to attract the funding and resources necessary to enable PT Barnum Apartment residents to proactively engage in making their neighborhood a healthy and safe place to live. Part of creating an environment where residents thrive, is doing away with the efforts of Park City Communities (PCC), the Bridgeport Housing Authority, to dismantle existing community and sow division among residents of this low-income public housing development. PT Partners' vision is to recreate a PT Barnum community who works together where resident leaders are empowered to actively drive change to break down systemic and institutional oppression in their lives, their neighborhood, and the greater Bridgeport community.

Just two years ago, PTP created its Anti-Oppression Task Force, a resident-owned initiative and campaign, which was spearheaded by an effort to investigate how PCC's policies and negligence have impacted the safety, quality of life, and voice of residents living in PT Barnum Apartments. Before the Task Force was created, residents were consistently coming to PTP with their issues, mostly related to rent calculations and the lack of information with regard to their rent and lease rules. While attempting to capture information to aid residents, PTP discovered this information was nearly impossible to obtain from PCC. This led to a deeper dive into how HUD required resident input regarding housing authority policies and practices is obtained. PTP believes that the resident perspective, as a collective, should run in tandem with PCC and HUD regarding the development, implementation, and practice of policies for PCC and HUD.

Ultimately, PTP has observed and believes the following about the housing authority's current policies and practices; they are oppressive in that:

- They are extremely inconsistent;
- They have an inability to appropriately monitor and address expectations;
- They use language that is designed to confuse and discourage;
- They are not physically available and are, therefore, inaccessible.

By September 2019, Anti-Oppression Task Force members, delayed and deflected by PCC for too long, contacted the regional HUD office seeking information about bylaws and an ear for their struggles with PCC. The Task Force inquiry never received an adequate response. This has been the Task Force's frustration for too long.

In December 2019, the final blow that PTP faced was eviction from Gary Crooks (the PT Barnum Apartments community center) and all PT property, which means a loss of critical space for meetings and programming. These programs include the Food Pantry, Clothing Closet, Girl Scouts, and the resident leadership training program, among others. PTP plans to find a new space for these activities, while supporting the demand that the Gary Crooks space be returned to PT residents.

Executive Summary

HUD is responsible for ensuring that low-income public housing is “decent, safe, and affordable.” However, neither HUD nor PCC (the local housing authority) have been able to uphold this responsibility in PT Barnum Apartments. The Anti-Oppression Task Force, which is made up of 50% residents living in PT Barnum Apartments, and 50% outside partners, has set out to identify those areas where the Task Force can best advocate for other residents.

In the following report, the Anti-Oppression Task Force’s findings in dealing with PCC and HUD with regard to PT Barnum Apartment residents will be made clear. The Anti-Oppression Task Force’s (1) claims, (2) findings (3) supporting evidence, (4) demands, and (5) call to action for local representatives, community partners, and the press will be presented as well.

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CLAIMS

PT Barnum Apartment residents face a number of fundamental problems in their interaction with PCC:

- PCC attempts to block residents from participating in Commissioners meetings where decisions are made;
- PCC has a pattern of “delay and deflect” in response to inquiries into information as basic as evictions and fines, to inquiries concerning parking policies and procedures;
- PCC has a way of thwarting residents’ efforts to meet their community’s needs, including closing down the Community Resource Hub, a collaboration with the Community Policing Division; and,
- Ultimately, PCC demonstrates its frustration with PTP’s success at raising resident voices by evicting PTP from Gary Crooks (PT Barnum residents’ community center) and all PCC property.

PCC’s demonstrated mode of operation is a threat to the community sovereignty and collective power of that PTP has worked so hard to build.

Five Key Areas

The Task Force has identified five key areas of focus where it can have the most impact. These key areas fall under one or more of these general headings: **Safety, Quality of Life,** and **Resident Voice/Leadership.**



CLAIMS

Safety: Mold

Information regarding the growth of black mold in apartments

History

The story of the deterioration of the relationship between PCC and PT Barnum Apartment residents began in 2017 with an attempt by the housing authority to correct the live mold problem about which most residents raised their voices. After conducting a door knocking campaign in the Apartments, PTP also pulled in local council people to press PCC to make changes related to the live mold. Finally, HUD was contacted and did an inspection. As a result of the inspection, it was discovered that the ventilation system was likely the cause of the mold. By late 2018, all ventilators in the Apartments were replaced. Months later, residents noted that the mold problem persisted. Apparently, a comprehensive mold assessment was never conducted and there was no way of dealing with it. PCC, embarrassed by the inadequate investigation, denied that mold was still a problem, and has been growingly hostile toward PTP's efforts to make change in PT Barnum Apartments.

Safety: Parking

A lack of a comprehensive and effective parking policy and resulting competition for spaces

History

In PT Barnum housing's past, every housing unit was assigned one parking space. This policy was simple but was flawed and caused some division among residents. This policy was dissolved and the replacement is not much more than an inadequate memo that has left residents with little guidance over who is entitled to a parking space and who is not, there has been a kind of competition and enmity among neighbors and residents which, until the change of policy, was unseen. In mid-September of 2019, after PTP did a door knocking campaign and convened focus groups to determine residents' thoughts on the parking issue, PTP developed a comprehensive parking policy that could be used to create official policy. PCC has not responded to PTP's work to resolve this issue with the needed resources, including professional services and funding.

CLAIMS

Quality of Life: Maintenance

Too few trash receptacles, and too few maintenance staff people

History

To date, every three units have been assigned two trash receptacles which are picked up by a contracted refuse/sanitation company each week. This has proven to be too little, as the limited number of trash cans overflow, creating an unsightly mess. Further, there are only four maintenance staff to deal with a wide range of maintenance issues. The maintenance staff often lacks the licensing or expertise to deal with, for instance, removing mold from apartment walls. Change needs to happen within PCC if PTP is going to resolve these urgent concerns. Residents are often placed at blame for the visual mess of the property but, with so few resources and effective staffing, residents cannot be responsible for the mismanagement of PCC and the property's deterioration.

Quality of Life: Mailboxes

A lack of access to safe and functional mailboxes

History

In the past, mailboxes were open to the public and convenient for residents to access. However, as time ensued, the mailboxes were vandalized and fell into severe disrepair. A USPS worker was harmed and USPS asked for a remedy to ensure their workers' safety. In fact, the mailboxes were becoming unsafe for not only workers but for residents too. PCC created a plan to purchase new mailboxes and move these new mailboxes into the laundry room, with the unilateral decision to lock the facility on weekends and before 9 am and after 5 pm weekdays. Residents, particularly those that worked regular business hours, protested against this change; they signed petitions, went to Commissioner's meetings and suggested viable alternatives. These suggestions also included adequate access for residents. While PCC promised key card access to the mailroom for residents only, this promise has not been fulfilled. Additionally, after Task Force outreach, the local postmaster demanded that PCC open the mailroom with adequate access. To this day, there is a completed and updated laundry/ mailbox facility but it remains closed by 150 Highland Ave Executive Staff of PCC.

CLAIMS

Resident Voice

The resident perspective has been blocked from Housing Commissioner meetings, where decisions are being made that directly affect residents

History

The Resident Council is an independent empowerment group, mandated by HUD to represent low-income public housing residents' interests and support their self-determination (and comes with funding). The Resident Advisory Board is a separate entity to advise and support good HUD policy, such as the 5-Year Plan. Commissioner's Meetings gather monthly to hear residents at public comment and to hold its meetings regarding budget and policies for PCC. Residents of PT Barnum have been blocked from attending meetings, from holding elections to determine officers and forming an active body to get its work done. This means that all of the information gathered through the Task Force and PTP has no place where it really counts—where budgetary decisions are being made. Changes are being made to rectify this reality.

Conclusion

As PTP has observed, these are tactics that oppress residents. During the Community Forum/ Breakfast, residents will demand action from PCC. This will bring PTP closer to realizing its core objective: building community toward achieving self-determination.



FINDINGS

The section that follows presents a slightly more in-depth look at the Anti-Oppression Task Forces' findings as they relate to PCC's response to issues of safety, quality of life, and resident voice.

SAFETY: MOLD

As far as PTP's findings regarding the black mold issue, in 2017, PTP organizers walked through PT Barnum Apartments to speak with residents about repairs needed in their apartments. Many residents noted that live mold was a problem. In December 2017, local city-elected officials, PT Barnum residents, and PTP staff met to review the mold issue. A state representative was encouraged to put pressure on PCC to address and remedy the problem. While there are no specific requirements from HUD to remedy this concern, PCC is responsible for the safety of residents. Live mold in apartments is clearly a safety issue.

As a result of the walkthrough, inadequate ventilation in resident bathrooms was identified. HUD came to do an inspection which revealed that most inspected units had mold or chipped paint (an outcome of poor ventilation). Based on the report completed, HUD remarked that the mold was pervasive and a pattern. When HUD reached out to PCC, PCC noted that the ventilation system was original to the building and was not functioning properly. By December 2018, all ventilators were replaced at PT Barnum Apartments.

However, more recently, in a meeting with the new Site Manager, PTP shared its discovery that while the ventilators had been replaced, the live mold problem had not been remediated. PTP started a door knocking campaign and found that a comprehensive mold assessment was never completed. Since early attempts to address the mold issue, PCC has been growingly hostile toward PTP's efforts to make change in PT Barnum Apartments.

SAFETY: PARKING

With regard to the Anti-Oppression Task Force's findings related to parking, the Task Force has observed that a lack of a comprehensive and effective parking policy has caused animosity among residents and neighbors.

1. Not enough space for the number of cars and multiple car holders take up too many spaces near apartments
2. No consideration of health care staff coming to work for residents
3. No real consequence for people who park but do not live at PT
4. No designated visitor parking
5. Not enough adequate handicap spaces
6. No signage or proper lines drawn
7. No real consequence for people who violate the parking memorandum

The Task Force fears that this hostility may turn deadly if the issue is not addressed soon. PTP took a year to talk with many residents about their thoughts, challenges, and frustrations with parking. Based on these conversations, PTP developed a comprehensive policy draft that could be used as a starting point to create official policy. This draft was completed in mid-September of 2018. However, PCC has continued to delay and deflect responsibility and refuses to take action to remedy this situation. This flies in the face of HUD's obligation to create "decent, safe, and affordable housing."

FINDINGS

QUALITY OF LIFE: MAINTENANCE

PT residents need a seat at Commissioner meetings so that budgeting is allocated where it is most needed. Clearly, the budget does not meet the needs of residents when there are only four maintenance staff for a complex of 360 units and only two trash receptacles for every three apartments. Further, in many cases, the small maintenance staff lacks the experience or expertise to properly handle the maintenance issues that arise; actual licensed professionals are needed for jobs like mold remediation. The many lawsuits against PCC (e.g. for deaths from fire and the lack of reasonable access to buildings for people with disabilities, etc.) point to a larger problem of neglect and mismanagement.

QUALITY OF LIFE: MAILBOXES

The issue of safe and readily available access to PT Barnum Apartment mailboxes has been a problem for some time – highlighted for PCC when a US Postal worker was held at gunpoint while delivering to PT Apartments. Yet, the mailboxes were being broken into and vandalized and unsafe for residents too. In response to this concern (four years later), PCC unilaterally proposed to move the mailboxes into the laundry room and restrict access to them, locking the laundry room before 9 am and after 5 pm on weekdays and all day on weekends. This was an attempt to secure USPS workers. However, residents who worked during normal business hours noted that this was extremely inconvenient and prevented residents from getting their regular mail, as well as notices from PCC in a timely fashion. In total, residents:

1. Circulated a petition
2. The Task Force spoke at Commissioner's meetings
3. Front line PCC staff and resident leadership worked on a resident-focused solution - PCC discussed giving residents key card access to mailboxes (but recently reneged on the plan).
4. After unilateral decision by PCC, Task Force approached the Post Master for support
5. Ultimately, the local postmaster demanded that the room be opened and that residents have full-time access to mail. Residents still do not have full-time access to these new mailboxes – nearly six months later.

FINDINGS

QUALITY OF LIFE: RESIDENT VOICE/LEADERSHIP

Housing regulations require resident input into policy-making. The President of the resident-elected PT Resident Council should attend PCC Commissioner meetings. However, as was the case for more than a year, the Council was prevented from having meetings and elections, and has been turned away from Resident Advisory Board (RAB) meetings despite an expressed interest on behalf of residents to attend meetings. Further, on several occasions, the Commissioner meeting has been changed without notice to residents and, in other cases, last minute changes have been made to meetings without any communication to residents. Further, opportunities to contribute to plans and policies are not adequately posted nor communicated – no communal spaces at PT Barnum. Any attempt to create this space, e.g. Gary Crooks or police sub-station are blocked. No such intentional spaces exist to gather, learn, and discuss shared interests on PT Barnum property.

While reviewing online HUD policies concerning RAB and obtaining a copy of their local bylaws from Connecticut Legal Services (CLS) in 2018, it was confirmed that HUD regulations require that a Resident Council President be elected by other residents. Stagnant for over a year due to interference by RAB and PCC, the PT Resident Council held local elections. A local organization gave oversight to the elections. Elections were held February 25, 2020 and twelve PT residents have enthusiastically volunteered to take part in the Resident Council Board for PT Barnum.



SUPPORTING EVIDENCE



Commissioner's Meeting - re: mailboxes



Resident Council 2019



Resident-led Summer Camp 2019



Grand Opening - Community Resource Hub
2019



Yoga at Gary Crooks 2018



Uniforms for Community Clothing Closet
2019



Mold 2019, bldg. 21

WHAT WE WANT

In order to hold PCC accountable, the Anti-Oppression Task Force has the following demands:

- A) Remediate the mold in PT Apartments – after a comprehensive professional assessment of the 360 apartments/units to determine the affected units.
- B) Review, implement, and provide resources for a comprehensive and effective parking policy, developed by residents back in September 2018, with the obligation to provide all needed financial and human resources—a working group of PT residents, partners, and PCC staff—to get started March 27, 2020.
- C) Open the mailroom to residents by March 5, 2020 with keys or key card access;
- D) Conduct an audit of the trashcan situation, with a PCC refuse contractor, PT Site Manager, PT Maintenance staff, and PT Barnum Resident Council. This process should capture the needs of families at PT Barnum Apartments. Commit to providing all necessary resources to meet the reassessed and realistic needs.
- E) Allow the Resident Council to do its work of representing Apartment residents' perspective during Commissioner meetings. Permit PT Barnum Apartment residents and leadership access to policies and regulations which govern their lives.
- F) Get PT Barnum Apartments' community center returned to residents for use at their discretion by April 2.

CALL TO ACTION

We call on our state and local representatives, community partners, and the news media to get involved with PT Partners' efforts by supporting resident self-determination. We charge local leaders and council people to advocate for low-income public housing residents in their legislatures as bill proposals come across their desks. They can demand more funding for low-income public housing; tap PCC and ask them to step up to the plate and fulfill their responsibility to residents/constituents. We invite community partners to suggest potential donors or new partners, who will aid in the effort of PTP to do its important work. We ask the media to investigate PCC's negligence in dealing with resident concerns and interests. We ask you all to donate to PT Partners or, if so inclined, join the Anti-Oppression Task Force to be on the frontline in the work to advocate for resident rights.