# Wardman Apartments Empowerment Project



"Working to unlock the future together"

Wardman Apartments, Roxbury, Massachusetts Implemented: September 2001-April 2003
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## **Project Abstract**

The Wardman Apartments Empowerment Project is a CED project that was designed to increase participation and establish a sense of community amongst residents residing in Wardman Apartments through a holistic community-building approach. Wardman Apartments is an 88-unit subsidized housing development that was purchased by the Urban Edge Housing Corporation in 2000.

Prior to 2000, there was an absence of unity in the Wardman Apartments community due to a deliberate lack of services, management disinvestment and a community that felt it had no voice to demand changes. Using the Wardman Apartments Empowerment Project as the catalyst, residents established commonalities, organized a resident association, implemented quality-of-life activities and developed effective means of communication in order to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with Urban Edge and make sustainable changes as to the manner in which services are provided to the community.

This project was conducted from September 2001 to April 2003 and is a chronicle of discovery and of a community working together to find its voice.



## **Project Summary**

Wardman Apartments is an 88-unit subsidized housing complex that is located in the Egleston Square section of Roxbury. Largely minority, the resident composition of Wardman Apartments is 63% African-American, 30% Latino, and 7% Haitian. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the development is situated within one of the most economically depressed neighborhoods in the City of Boston.

1 Seventy-five percent of households have incomes below 80% of Boston's median income. Jamaica Plain and Roxbury account for 20% of the entire Boston caseload for Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and unemployment is significantly higher than the city's 3.3% rate. High illiteracy and drop out rates compound the difficulty of obtaining jobs in the community. Located in the Ward 7 district, Wardman Apartments is represented politically by State Representative Gloria L. Fox, City Councilor Chuck Turner and State Representative Dianne Wilkerson.

Urban Edge has been a neighborhood based CDC for the past 29 years and owns and manages over 1065 properties throughout the Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan neighborhoods. Approximately three hundred and twenty-nine of these are resident controlled. Urban Edge has developed and sold more than 130 homes to first-time homebuyers with 30 additional homes currently in construction or predevelopment.

Wardman Apartments was formerly owned and managed for many years by long-time Boston landlord Lorenzo Pitts who lost the development when the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) foreclosed. After conducting outreach in the community for approximately one year, Urban Edge purchased Wardman Apartments in 2000. In order to move forward as a united and empowered community, residents have to realize and appreciate their similarities and work on ways to improve their relationship with the management company. However, this has not been an easy undertaking. Even after Urban Edge conducted extensive outreach, residents continued to view the agency as being biased towards African-Americans and showing outright favoritism towards Latinos-both as residents and employees. Some long-time residents feeling disenfranchised and powerless after years of dealing with the standoffish approach of Pitts took a defensive stand against Urban Edge. The widely felt consensus at the time was that resident issues would remain the same under the new management.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Urban Edge Demographic Overview Report. Ackerman, Ryan (2001)

Urban Edge subsequently remodeled a former vacant basement space into a new community room. This was the first community space dedicated exclusively for Wardman residents' use. In October 2001, several months after completion, years of pent-up frustrations came to a head. Vandals broke into the room and destroyed computers, books, furniture, and appliances. Nothing was taken. Some residents felt that the act was personal and in response to on-site renovations that residents had to endure during the renovation process. The majority of residents had no reaction and several stated that they felt no connection to the room or the organization.

If community members have no venue to interact with each other and fully participate with the Urban Edge organization, they would be relegated to continue as a fragmented community with no unified voice and it will reinforce their belief regarding management having no respect or accountability to them.

The goal of this project therefore was to build a sense of community and increase participation amongst the families residing at Wardman Apartments and the larger surrounding community in working with Urban Edge Management to open the lines of communication, eradicate problems of the past and build a sustainable bridge towards the future. By carrying out the outlined goal, residents were presented the opportunity to actively work together to change the status quo expectations of the past and begin to make tangible long-term changes to help improve the overall community. This project aspired to bring a balance of power to the playing field. "Organizing does two central things to seek to rectify the problem of power imbalance-it builds a permanent base of people power so that dominant financial and institutional power can be challenged and held accountable to values of greater social, environmental and economic justice; and it transforms individuals and communities, making them mutually respectful co-creators of public life rather than passive objects of decisions made by others". (Community Organizing, 2001)

The objectives to meet this goal included:

- <u>1-Establishing a set of common interests</u> to identify and clarify next steps for residents to dialogue with management.
- <u>2-Establishing a resident organization</u> such as the 5Ws to bring the community together to advocate as a united voice representing the community.
- <u>3-Implementatation of activities</u> to establish quality of life and community-building events for residents and strengthen resident services.

4-Develop effective means of communicating with each other and Management to develop and implement venues for information exchange.

All of the objectives were achieved during the project period. However, there are on-going issues with translating written materials and including Hispanic residents in the process. Community members realize that in order to be a participating community all community members have to be welcome at the table. According to Reid in *Community Participation* (2000), "Participating communities make no distinctions among various groups and types of personalities who offer themselves to community involvement. All persons are actively welcomed, regardless of color, age, race, prior community involvement, level of education, occupation, personal reputation, handicap, religion, or any other factor".

Residents have diligently and strategically worked on issues that were problems in the past and turned them into positive outputs. They have formed alliances with other community-based groups and have learned how to hold management accountable. They are no longer content to sit on the sidelines. They have become participants as opposed to spectators. Through forming alliances with each other, they were able to transform the Wardman Apartments community and establish a significantly different relationship with management.

### **Definition of the Problem**

Residents felt disenfranchised. The problem existed because the previous landlord was an absentee and uncommitted landlord at best. Problem tenants were allowed to terrorize other residents with no apparent consequences. As long as everyone paid some rent and didn't call attention to sub-standard conditions, they were protected from eviction. Management turned a blind eye to terrible conditions. Repairs were made in a haphazard manner, there was no communication and no funds were utilized for resident services. Most residents became immune to their surroundings and refused to speak out. Years of apathy and a sense of hopelessness were a direct result of residents being held hostage in their homes and had resulted in unresolved tension. Due to the effects of living under a manager who allowed problem tenants to wreck havoc in their community, there was no sense belonging and little community cohesiveness.

#### Some of the causes were:

- 1) There was no perceived common interests. Residents did not openly dialogue their concerns with each other.
- 2) There was a lack of joint and community building activities. There was no resident services or activities provided under the previous landlord.
- 3) There was no resident organization in place. Once the once active 5Ws resident leadership group ceased operations, residents no longer met.
- <u>4) There was no effective communication between residents and management</u>. This has led to varying degrees of miscommunication.

The above outlined causes are in direct contrast to the organizing principles outlined in *Community Participation (June 2000)*, which states, "Active community participation is the key to building an empowered community. Of all the empowerment principles, active citizen participation is perhaps the most important".

## **Community Background**

Years ago, there was an active resident leadership group, aptly named 5Ws for Wardman Road, Westminster Ave, Walnut Park, Washington Street and Waldren Road. Community members met at a resident's house. Once she moved from the community, the group ceased to exist. Residents fondly recall neighborhood events sponsored by the 5Ws group in conjunction with the Boston Police particularly an annual event called "Hands Across Egleston" where the entire community would come together to discuss safety in the community. The events would culminate with large cookouts.

There were no community-building activities once the 5Ws group disbanded and there were no resident led initiatives to change this due to high neighborhood crime, mistrust, and neglect by the management company. There were no indoor spaces such as a library or community center and there was a noticeable absence of safe outdoor play areas. Several children were injured by random shootings in the local park where the 5Ws group previously held annual community cookouts. This caused families to remain isolated in their homes. Despite the fact that many Wardman Apartments residents have resided in the community for ten years or more, they did not interact with each other. There was apathy and an absence of community.

These conditions have left lasting impressions on residents that carried over during the management transition. Residents were previously ignored and left to fend for themselves. By experiencing this, residents held emotions inside and Urban Edge later had to deal with the repercussions. The organization quickly realized that they had to build bridges to learn from the past and form a new interactive participatory relationship where resident input could be appreciated and incorporated.

One major development that defined the overall essence of this project occurred in September 2002. A Caucasian handyman who lived directly across from Wardman Apartments was killed over a \$1,000 dispute. Community members knew who the killer was, but didn't want to get involved. Residents held their monthly September task force meeting with a community services officer who explained to residents that the incident could have happened to anyone. Community members realized the pattern of fear that existed and a number of anonymous calls were made with information that led to the arrest of the suspect. See appendix. It was the beginning of a new relationship with the Boston Police whom residents viewed as not being responsive to community needs. Residents later advocated for Urban Edge to install security cameras on the twelve Wardman Apartments buildings as a measure to prevent loitering and break-ins and increase security.

The above situation was the perfect epitome of the true meaning of organizing. Residents listened to each other and made their own decisions, thus empowering themselves. The mainstream organizing model is based on an idea that organizing is a means to build power to achieve a specific change, and that, once a change is made, this will spontaneously lead to a more empowered group of leaders who will move on to make other changes. Therefore, it doesn't really matter what struggle you focus on; you pick an immediate, winnable issue to get started on and let things go on from there (Chinese Progressive Association, 2003)

## **Major Assumptions**

Resident control of subsidized housing is not new. The concept has been successfully implemented within inner-city communities across the country for over thirty years. In order to get to the level of organizing and strategy needed to undertake such an enormous task, residents have to develop the mindset that they are empowered, educated and in control of their housing future. They also have to develop partnerships with established non-profit housing organizations that are community-based and are community revitalization (Shelterforce Online).

## **Project Goal**

#### ☐ Goal Statement

The goal of this project was to build a sense of community and increase participation amongst the families residing at Wardman Apartments and the larger surrounding community in working with Urban Edge Management to open the lines of communication, eradicate problems of the past and build a sustainable bridge towards the future. By carrying out the outlined goal, residents were presented the opportunity to actively work together to change the status quo expectations of the past and begin to make concrete tangible changes to help improve the overall community.

#### ☐ Desired Conditions for the Target Community

- 1. **Establish a set of common interests**-To identify and clarify next steps for residents to dialogue with management.
- 2. Establish a resident organization-To establish an organization such as the 5Ws to bring the community together to advocate as a united voice representing the community.
- 3. **Implementation of activities-**To establish quality of life and community-building events for residents and strengthen resident services.
- 4. Develop effective means of communicating with each other and Management-To develop and implement venues for information exchange.

## **Methodology**

Prior to the Wardman Apartments Empowerment Project, there were no services in the Wardman Apartments community. Post-project a number of changes have occurred as of April 2003.

#### Results

Pre-Project

•		•		
sk Force Meetings	1x month	Monthly Task Force Meetings	1xmonth	
8	0	Novelettere	7	

Post-Project

Monthly Task Force Meetings	1x month	Monthly Task Force Meetings	1xmonth
Newsletters	0	Newsletters	7
Elected Task force members	0	Elected Task Force Members	6
Community Events	0	Community Events	12

#### **Project Objectives**

The following objectives were designed to meet the goal of the Wardman Apartments Empowerment Project:

Objective #1- Establish a set of common interests-To identify and clarify next steps for residents to dialogue with management.

Inputs

Focus Groups-Two focus groups were held in April 2002 and October 2002.

Resident Survey- A resident survey was conducted February – March 2002 (see appendix)

Outputs

A resident survey was conducted February-March 2002 in order to discover similarities and needs. Out of eighty-eight households, only thirty-one households responded. Others stated that they wouldn't participate because they felt things would remain the same. Others cited disinterest and/or a fear of reprisal. The average respondent lived in the development for ten years. Eighteen respondents stated that they were somewhat satisfied with Urban Edge. Ten residents were very satisfied. The survey found that most of the respondents attended two or more events in the community room and

were very happy with resident services. One resident stated, "It was about time." Another resident volunteered to assist with implementing programs for youth during the summer.

#### What tasks still need to be completed?

- 1. Residents need to decide on future training for resident ownership.
- 2. Residents need to conduct outreach to complete task force survey (see appendix)

<u>Objective #2-</u> Establish a resident organization such as the 5Ws to bring the community together to advocate as a united voice representing the community.

Inputs

**Resident Meetings**- Residents have conducted monthly meetings since January 2000 to discuss issues of concerns with residents and Urban Edge.

Outreach for Board of Directors- July - August 2002.

Outputs

Resident Meetings- Approximately 8-10 residents attended meetings on a regular basis.

Election of Wardman Apartments Task Force Board of Directors- Approximately six to eight residents attended monthly meetings since Urban Edge expressed interest in purchasing the development. Outreach for the first elected resident task force was conducted July-August 2002. Residents developed an informational brochure to distribute throughout the community regarding the impending election and the role and responsibilities of the task force. Urban Edge liked the brochure so much that they later fine-tuned the idea for the resident services department when my term was completed. See appendix. Following the August monthly meeting, the following residents were elected to a one-year term: Jessica Brown-Co-Chair, Gillian Thomas-Co-Chair, Dorothy Dennis-Treasurer, Geraldine Grant-Co-Treasurer, Ann Brown-Co-Treasurer and LaTanya Brown-Secretary. Increased Participation- Urban Edge now sends two to three employees to each meeting to give updates and information to residents. Some issues that have been discussed include work orders, safety, evictions and construction.

#### What tasks still need to be completed?

- 1. Although residents held an interim election, they have yet to complete task force by-laws. If residents eventually want to incorporate, this is a must do.
- The secretary must record minutes at each meeting. Because this did not occur, verbal promises were made to residents throughout the process and were later recanted. It is vitally important that minutes are taken at all meetings and distributed to all residents. Because

minutes were not taken at all meetings, there was confusion over who said what, when. In hindsight, simply taking minutes would have eliminated that problem.

<u>Objective #3-</u> Implementation of activities- To establish qualify of life and community-building events for residents and strengthen resident services.

Inputs

#### **Monthly Meetings/Two Focus Group Meetings**

#### **Resident Volunteers**

Outputs

There have been a total of eleven community-building events held in the community room since September 2001. The first event was a Harvest Fair in October. The event was billed as a safe alternative to Halloween. Families from throughout the community as well as state Senator Dianne Wilkerson attended and had a great time. This event was followed by a Christmas celebration (December 01, 02), Valentine's Day (February 02), Black History Celebration (February 02, 03), Easter Egg Hunt (April 02), Mother's Day Brunch (May 02), Spring Planting Day (June 02), and Thanksgiving dinner (November 02). Over 120 people have attended each event held in the community room.

There have been two other successful events sponsored in the community room. The Boston Public School Summer Feeding Program invited youth up to 18 years old to eat free lunch during summer months. A resident volunteer assisted everyday. Over 500 lunches were served during July and August 2002. There was also a summer arts program implemented in the summer of 2002. A professional artist worked with approximately 20 youth one day a week for six weeks to create art projects. Youth from throughout the community enjoyed lots of first-time activities and were able to build relationships where they once were none. Although people lived in close proximity, they didn't interact with each other.

The above mentioned activities helped foster a sense of community and promote ownership of the community room. In addition to Westminster Court Apartments Cooperative, several other Urban Edge owned developments formed alliances with Wardman Apartments and collaborated on several events, most notably the 2002 National Night Out event, which was a huge event with over 300 people attending the first outdoor event on August 6<sup>th</sup>. The Boston Police Area E-13 Community Services Department presented the task force with a 'Good Neighbor' Award. National Night Out was an impetus to involve all stakeholders and the entire 5Ws community in celebrating safety in the community.

<u>Objective #4-</u> Develop effective means of communicating with each other and management- To develop and implement venues for information exchange,

Inputs

**Monthly Meetings-** Residents agreed that it was important that written materials be developed to inform all community members about events and the purpose of the task force.

Outputs

**Newsletters-** Newsletters are being developed and published on a sporadic basis. A challenge has been getting the issues translated in Spanish for Latino residents. As of April 2003 a total of eight newsletters have been distributed.

**Task Force Brochure**- An official Wardman Apartments Resident Task Force Brochure was developed and distributed throughout the community. Urban Edge Resident Services liked the idea so much that they later developed an improved version for the community services department when my term ended.

**Community Room Rules**- Residents worked with management to develop a list of rules and regulations for resident use of community room. Residents can rent the space in four-hour increments for \$50. They must leave a \$100 refundable deposit. All monies raised will go into a resident activities fund.

This project positively impacted the overall community in several ways.

- It helped establish relationships between residents of Wardman Apartments as well as residents of nearby developments
- It brought residents together to strategize with Boston Police on safety issues
- It provided a venue for Urban Edge and community members to dialogue on a regular basis

## **Project Background**

I was hired as an AmeriCorps Resident Services Provider in September 2001. After Urban Edge purchased the development, they vowed to work with residents to improve conditions both internally and externally. Under this premise, they secured financing of \$10.8 million to conduct on-site renovations and they applied for and received one year funding for a full-time LISC AmeriCorps Resident Services Provider. My responsibilities included working with residents to implement identified services, including establishing a resident task force, developing community-building activities, and increasing communication and safety in the community.

Due to the fact that there was no recent history of resident involvement, I conducted one-on-one house interviews with thirty-one head of households utilizing a resident survey. Using this tool, I was

able to incorporate resident ideas for activities and awareness regarding the impending formation of the first elected task force. I had to gain residents trust due to the non-existent relationship they had with the previous management. People were skeptical of Urban Edge and what my role in the community would be. Over time, I was able to garner interest in establishing a relationship between residents and management and show that by working together, more could be achieved. I focused on developing what Parachini and Covington (2001) calls a 'Participative Culture". I helped develop the skills of the residents to advocate and do for themselves. I learned early on that if this project was to be sustainable, residents had to take the lead and I had to follow. I learned early on, "Never do for others what they can do for themselves".

Over the past year and a half, various stakeholders participated in the outcome of this project including Wardman Apartments residents, Area E-13 Boston Police Community Services officers, residents of the nearby Westminster Court Apartments Cooperative Residents Association, Urban Edge Property Management and Resident Services staff, local business owners, state Senator Dianne Wilkerson and residents of the 5Ws community. All stakeholders provided invaluable insight to the challenges and rewards of working together and developing a strong and sustainable organization.

Residents are excited about the newly elected task force and have joined forces with the nearby Westminster Court Apartments Cooperative Board to learn about board leadership training opportunities and how the two groups can work together to better serve the community in a holistic approach. Westminster Court Apartments is cooperatively owned with Urban Edge.

<u>Stakeholder</u>	Level of Participation		<u>Tasks</u>	
	High	Medium	Low	

Boston Police Area E-13	Attended meetings-High	Assisted with crime stats
Westminster Court Co-op	Attended meetings-High	Assisted with formation of TF
UE Property Management	Attended meetings-High	Worked with TF on rules
UE Resident Services	Attended meetings-High	Provided <sup>2</sup> RSP and funds
Abutting Residents	Attended meetings-High	Distributed fliers/phonebanked
Senator Dianne Wilkerson	Attended meetings-High	Gave speeches/presented awards
Local Business Owners	Donated items-High	Donated food & in-kind donations

#### **Conclusions/Recommendations**

A. Has the project product and or goal changed since you began the project? If so, how and why has the project product or goal changed?

Yes, I think it has changed for two reasons.

1. Urban Edge received \$10.8 million to renovate the Wardman Apartments development.

Renovations were done on an on-site basis, which was viewed by residents as an attempt to save relocation costs at their expense. Once the resident services provider position ended, residents were informed that they could no longer access Urban Edge letterhead for donations, there was no additional funding available for additional renovations as promised early in the project, and the key to the community room that management had agreed would go to the task force chairperson to continue community outreach was taken back.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Resident Services Provider

2. I think it was unrealistic and unfair for Urban Edge to place a full-time resident services provider in the Wardman community for one year and expect that residents would have learned enough skills to sustain projects on their own with no further support. It is imperative that Urban Edge provides continued resources and support. The Wardman Apartments Resident Services position ended on September 2002. I am continuing to work with residents on a volunteer basis, which is unrealistic and time-consuming since I am employed full-time elsewhere. Now that residents are organized, they cannot go back to where they once were. They are bringing the organization to monthly meetings and are holding them accountable to ensure that services will continued to be offered to the community. Through empowerment, residents found a voice where their once was none. "Empowerment for a person begins with taking responsibility. Empowerment for an organization begins with commitment: the responsibility its members take for it". What is Organizing? (1997)

# B. Identify any two factors or conditions that if they had been different would have increased your ability to complete your project.

There are three conditions that I believe could have made a difference in the success of this project. They are:

1. Increased Resident Involvement-Although attendances is excellent at all events, only six to eight residents attended task force meetings on a regular basis. I think if more residents participated, it would have made a noticeable difference as to how Urban Edge responded. There was an issue of the lack of participation of Latino residents at task force meetings. Several residents expressed concern that Latino residents attended all community events, but were absent from monthly meetings. The community had a preconceived notion that Urban Edge was a Latino run organization due to the large number of Latino employees. This issue only served to support that theory. According to (Streets of Hope, 1994) this is an issue that wasn't exclusive to Wardman Apartments; it was also faced by another local organization. Roxbury Multi-Service Center was accused of trying to exhort 'Latino domination'. Eventually, the problem was resolved through open dialogue. According to one board member. "It wasn't just the boundaries on the map, it was the boundaries in our heads".

2. The attitude of Urban Edge Management-Management has steadfastly refused to give the task force chairperson a key to exterior doorways in order to conduct outreach. This was promised prior to my departure in order for residents to conduct outreach. See minutes. She was told that she should ring other resident's doorbells to gain entry. This has proven to be unrealistic and a hindrance.

# C. Identify one unexpected thing that occurred that significantly affected your ability to complete the project and achieve the stated goal(s)

There has been nothing that occurred that has hindered the project from proceeding. If anything, the unexpected happenings such as the issue with the entry door key and suspended use of organizational letterhead has served to strengthen residents resolve to band together as a united group. It has pushed them to limits they didn't anticipate and has forced them to move forward at an even stronger pace. Residents are now looking into the possibility of forming a 501 C 3 organization. Urban Edge has discouraged this move telling residents that they feel the move is premature.

#### D. What two things would you suggest to someone doing a similar project?

- 1. Bring all residents into the fold from the very beginning-That did not happen and now it is perceived as a problem. Greater emphasize should have been placed on being totally inclusive and participatory.
- 2. Place more emphasize on accessing training to prepare for resident ownership-Several developments within the greater Boston area are pioneers in the movement for resident control of public housing. Residents of Wardman Apartments should extend invitations to these groups to access free training. There is no reason to try and reinvent the wheel when the makers of the wheel are available locally.

#### Describe the current conditions of the Target Community

Community members are facing challenges from all fronts- Economically, politically and institutionally. Economically-A number of residents are unemployed or underemployed with limited incomes. There are very real threats to their affordable housing as a number of Wardman Apartment residents have been evicted or transferred during the past two years.

Politically-Massachusetts has a new governor who is making sweeping cuts across the board in housing and social service programs. A number of residents receive MassHealth medical benefits and Transitional Aid to Families with Needy Children (TAFNC). Both programs have taken swift cuts.

Institutionally-Urban Edge has made attempts to build relationships with residents who are understandably hesitant to fully trust due to past experiences.

#### What did I learn?

I learned that in order to anything to be successfully implemented community-wise, community members have to be the driving force. The agenda has to be theirs and they have to feel that their participation will lead to change. I learned that there is a lot of talent in the community. People had been isolated. Once given the opportunity, they have shown that they can work effectively together. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who believed that content must come from the participants in order to break through what he dubbed the "cultures of silence" supports this train of thought.

#### Is this a "CED" project?

Yes. It has all of the required elements-Community, Economic and Development. Wardman Apartments was purchased utilizing Low-Income Housing Tax Credits. At the end of a 15-year timeframe, residents will have the option to purchase the development and become owners as opposed to renter through the establishment of a resident-controlled limited equity cooperative. According to the Urban Land Institute, "Community groups are effective in developing such projects; they represent community interests and give legitimacy to the process. They need to control the policy, program, and process". They also have to develop partnerships with established non-profit Housing organizations that are community based and are committed to community revitalization (Shelterforce Online, 2000).

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