

Community Partnership Award

POPULATIONS OF 10,000 TO 49,999

TARPON SPRINGS, FLORIDA

ICMA's 2007 Community Partnership Award in the 10,000-to-49,999 population category goes to the city of Tarpon Springs, Florida, and City Manager Ellen S. Posivach for the Affordable Housing Partnership.



ELLEN S. POSIVACH

The Union Academy Neighborhood, a public housing development within walking distance of the historic downtown area of Tarpon

Springs, Florida, had a persistent crime problem. Making matters worse, properties in the area were declining in value and condition, and more than 70 percent of the dwelling units were renter occupied. The stage was set for an innovative public-private partnership that would turn the situation around and create a neighborhood with a true sense of community and pride.

At the outset, the Tarpon Springs Police Department, code enforcement division, and housing authority worked closely to improve the environment and remove residents who were involved in illegal narcotics activities. Because the housing authority maintains strict rules for eligibility and adheres to a “one-strike” policy, the number of reported incidents fell by 37 percent between 1994 (before the program began) and 2004, and the number of calls reporting violence dropped by 63 percent.

The improvements were due not just to an increase in police presence. Through 2002–2005, two Community Development Block Grants from Pinellas County Community Development (PCCD) provided funding to reconstruct two major roads that bisect the neighborhood; add decorative brick crosswalks and pedestrian amenities; and improve streetlighting, sidewalks, drainage,

and infrastructure. In addition, public housing capital funds, PCCD State Housing Initiatives Partnership funds, and city redevelopment funds were used to demolish old public housing units and develop 19 new ones, with 52 more units to be completed in 2007–2008.

But even this was not enough to realize the overall goal that would ensure a long-lasting impact: home ownership.

The large number of vacant parcels within the area—by-products of high crime and blight—provided the opportunity for new home construction. On some lots, the housing authority is constructing townhouse-style buildings that are similar in design to market-priced complexes and are targeted toward families earning 60–80 percent of the median area income—a maximum of \$43,500 for a family of four. The units are paid for by city redevelopment funds and various county and state grants and programs. And with this commitment from the public sector has come investment from the private sector: Neighborhood Homes of West Florida signed on to build neotraditional single-family homes that would fit the neighborhood and add to the sense of community. Through 2006, 57 parcels of land had been purchased through the partnership, and 28 homes had been completed and sold.

Rehabilitation of existing homes is another part of the redevelopment effort. Some homes built during the 1970s are typically two-bedroom, one-bath structures with carports; while structurally sound, they lack many of today’s amenities. By buying and rehabilitating these structures,



Home ownership helps ensure a long-lasting positive impact on the community

the program provides a housing alternative for those who cannot qualify for a new home but can qualify for a low-priced rehabilitated home. It is also exploring lease options to purchase as an incentive for qualified applicants who are working to improve their credit.

In 2005, the Tarpon Springs Housing Authority created the Local Community Housing Corporation (LCHC), a private nonprofit affiliate agency. Along with developing and managing affordable housing, the LCHC provides several services that support residents, including

- *A home share program:* This program, the first of its kind in Florida, provides affordable rental properties by matching home providers with home seekers, conducting background checks, and thoroughly checking references. It also helps homeowners deal with skyrocketing insurance and property tax costs.
- *The Senior Home Repair Program:* Funded by PCCD, this program provides grants of up to \$20,000 for home repairs to seniors who are at least 62 years old, eligible for a homestead exemption, and under 120 percent of the median area income, and whose home does not exceed \$151,000 in value

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and has no tax liens against it. The LCHC helps the applicants with problems, confirms income qualification, processes grant and loan applications, obtains contractor bids, and inspects the work performed.

- *The Cops & Kids After-School/ Summer Camp Program:* Owned and operated by the Tarpon Springs Police Department, Cops & Kids is designed for very low-income children of middle-school age. The curriculum includes character building, life skills, educational programs, social skills, community service, and field trips. Fifty children attend during the school year, and 90 attend the summer camp—all free of charge. The housing authority and the YMCA of the Sun Coast are partners in this project, which is funded through a grant from the Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board.

All of these improvements and advantages—including Tarpon Springs Fundamental Elementary School; two major shopping centers; a centrally located community-based organization that delivers social services to needy residents; and proximity to the “Pinellas Trail” linear park—have made this public housing neighborhood so desirable that it now has a one-year waiting list. And each success further enhances the climate for new development.