EDUCATION:
A PATHWAY OUT OF POVERTY

Urban Strategies, Inc.
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WHO WE ARE:

Formed in 1978, Urban Strategies, Inc. (USI) is a national nonprofit with extensive experience in implementing place-based housing, neighborhood and human capital development strategies in public housing communities that are undergoing comprehensive neighborhood physical revitalization. For nearly 40 years, we have worked in over forty (40) distressed neighborhoods across multiple cities in the United States, and currently work to improve the social and economic mobility of more than 30,000 families living in assisted housing, including more than 10,000 school-aged children.

We distinctively help to improve the social and economic mobility of families and children by serving as an intermediary that addresses complicated and interdependent challenges that keep families stuck in poverty. Our expertise lies in deeply knowing the unique circumstances of the families and children we serve while also having broad knowledge of local community assets and opportunities available through service providers. This includes education leaders, health providers, and workforce development practitioners, among others. As a result, we ably facilitate appropriate services and linkages to assure the appropriate care and support is provided to families and children we serve.

The result we are aiming for is to ensure that all of the families we serve are stable and thriving.

BACKGROUND:

Since the late 1990’s, we have leveraged federal funding to advance our mission. These funding sources have primarily included HOPE VI and the Choice Neighborhood Initiative, both funded through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The purpose of HOPE VI was to improve the living environment of public housing residents, revitalize the sites on which severely distressed public housing units were located, decrease concentration of poverty, and build sustainable communities. The Choice Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI) is HUD’s successor to the HOPE VI program. Like HOPE VI, CNI focuses on transforming severely distressed subsidized housing properties. However, CNI expands HOPE VI’s reach to include private housing properties and entire neighborhoods. To advance the housing and neighborhood transformation components of our work, we partner with public and private partners, including residents, developers and local government leaders. Under both HOPE VI and CNI, we have been the lead partner selected to work directly with the residents to help them become stable and thriving. Via HOPE VI, this was done by focusing on school improvements. Under CNI, this has been done by providing case management, coaching and service coordination to support positive health, safety, employment, mobility, and education outcomes for residents in the target distressed development(s) and the surrounding neighborhood. Serving in this role is called the
PEOPLE Lead under CNI and currently, we are leading on nine of HUD’s CNI grants in different cities across the country.

EDUCATION AS THE PATHWAY OUT OF POVERTY

A focus on education has always been a big component of our work to accelerate families out of poverty. To this end, we work with youth and adults providing “two-generation” support to parents and their children. For the children, we intentionally connect them with strong education options while providing ongoing holistic family support and accountability agreements. As an intermediary, we help schools tackle the academic achievement gap, by helping our children to not only become stronger in academics, but also become socially and emotionally solid as well. Our work undergirds the following primary result areas: Kindergarten Readiness, Children Proficient in Reading and Math; College and Career Ready.

In early 2000, Sandra Moore and Susan Glassman, former USI leaders, produced The Neighborhood and Its School in Community Revitalization. In this monograph, they shared how USI and McCormack Baron Salazar (development partner) teamed up to improve schools located in distressed neighborhoods during community revitalization. This included upgrading a school’s physical assets, improving technology, providing programming and learning opportunities for children and adults, and identifying and hiring exceptional school leaders with the determination to run a high performing model school in mixed income neighborhoods. Both partners believed that a holistic approach to neighborhood redevelopment with high quality neighborhood schools is fundamental to community revitalization. We continue to hold this belief. However, our experiences over the recent seven years have shed light on new lessons learned since the publication in 2000. These new lessons have propelled us to reconsider how we use our limited resources to improve education outcomes for students living in distressed neighborhoods.

This update briefly explores the evolution of our work in education, discusses our new service delivery framework, and shares results we have achieved in education from our work on HOPE VI and from implementing CNI in two inaugural neighborhoods in New Orleans and San Francisco. We are also documenting lessons from communities in St. Louis, Sacramento, Louisville, Memphis, San Antonio, Pittsburgh, and Columbus.

THE ENHANCED NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL

To set context for these lessons, a brief review of USI’s earlier work is necessary. With the launch of the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) HOPE VI Urban Revitalization Program, we have been a leader working with neighborhood schools to improve their attractiveness to families with middle incomes. In The Neighborhood and Its School in Community Revitalization, case studies were shared about our experiences working with school-based leaders in places such as St. Louis (Jefferson Elementary and Adams Elementary), and in Atlanta (Fowler Elementary).

In these communities, we partnered with underfunded schools, overwhelmed principals and teachers, and disengaged parents to implement school improvement strategies geared towards
making the school, usually an elementary school, in a single community a desirable destination school for families moving into the neighborhood. By improving the neighborhood school, we “moved the needle” on improving the quality of life for families in the communities.

For example, in a report completed in 2004 called, “The Performance of Elementary Schools in Atlanta Housing Authority’s Revitalized Mixed-Income Communities,” by Thomas D. Boston, Ph.D, he shares that in 1988, Centennial Place Elementary School opened and replaced Fowler Elementary School. In his report, he determined that more than just the physical school building changed but change also happened with the students. He looked at whether the improvements in quality of instruction and the learning process at Centennial Place improved the performance of students. The results indicated that a significant improvement occurred in student performance accompanying the revitalization of Techwood Clark Howell Homes. The study was not able to specifically examine the performance of children whose families received public housing assistance and who attended the school.

Nonetheless, Centennial’s ranking improved from 60th in 1995 to 11th in 2002 according to their performance on Writing Assessments. Another proof point is the change that happened at Jefferson Elementary School in St. Louis, the headquarters for our organization. The Murphy Park housing development in the City of St. Louis was developed between 1996 and 2003 under Hope VI. Jefferson was situated in the neighborhood. At the time, 75% of the children in the neighborhood attended school elsewhere in the city or St. Louis County under a federal court-approved voluntary desegregated program. Given the myriad of problems at the school, millions of dollars were raised to spearhead physical, staffing and programmatic enhancements. By 2000, marked changes occurred. The school showed steady improvement in attendance, and standardized test scores. Science scores at the advanced and proficient levels rose from 5.5% in 2000 to 52.1% in 2004.

THE NECESSITY FOR CHANGE – USI’S UNIQUE EDUCATION APPROACH
Behind these improvements, the story was more complicated. Our educational efforts to enhance the neighborhood school benefited families with low to middle incomes that were moving into revitalized neighborhoods. The economic and social health of the community also improved. But public housing families that relocated outside of the revitalized neighborhood faced a challenging time navigating their new education realities. A common belief is that because the relocated families moved outside of the community that their students received the full benefit of what the schools outside of their former neighborhood had to offer. Our experiences in the Iberville public housing community in New Orleans gave us deep insights into this challenge.

It was necessary for our staff to pivot from working in one community with one school to working in 35 different schools with multiple school leaders, districts and service providers. This was necessary because in the decentralized charter system of New Orleans, no one agency is accountable for keeping track of all the students.

This experience taught us that we had to make a deliberate choice to focus our limited resources on the people that needed help the most, and who had the least amount of financial and social support –families and children living in distressed public housing neighborhoods. Much like a portable housing voucher, our education services would follow the children we serve.

Today our staff function much like a GPS for a family, providing expert navigation in the form of connections and service linkages. We have morphed from working only to enhance a neighborhood school, to deploying a team of top-notch local, degreed, Social Workers and Education Liaisons to partner with educational institutions sometimes across a region or municipality. Our unique education approach assists children and families that receive housing assistance to:

- create a results plan within each community that holds the family at the center of the result and develop a cradle to college and career pathway for each household. This strategy uses a Result Count approach promoted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- navigate the school choice maze they face when transitioning from assisted to other neighborhoods;
- connect with in-school support and out-of-school time programs to increase kindergarten readiness, reading and math proficiency and graduate high school college/career ready;
- convene education providers and align organizational contributions towards results; exchange data, host critical conversations, and address academic, social and emotional needs through implementation of evidence based solutions;
- empower families to advance public will through civic engagement;
- lead national dialogues and deliberations to inform policy and practices that support families.

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”
– Nelson Mandela
• address disparities and equity issues identified through data disaggregation and analysis;
  and;
• track individual-level student outcomes and measure results to inform service delivery.

Our work is buttressed by relationships with multiple elected officials, public school districts, individual schools, and other systems as appropriate, to empower families and children that live in new housing situations to beat the odds against school failure, intergenerational poverty and more.

This is our work -- all performed in service to our ultimate organizational purpose – All families are stable in their housing situation and thriving.

OUTCOMES AND OPPORTUNITIES - INAUGURAL CHOICE CITIES

In 2010 and 2011, the Alice Griffith and Iberville public housing sites were selected by HUD as CNI sites in the first round of the program. In 2012, USI began providing service coordination and direct case management support as the lead implementer for HUD People strategies for both neighborhoods. As the People lead, USI collaborated with various organizations to leverage resources to successfully implement placed based education strategies to help “turn the curve” in education outcomes for children and families. Urban Strategies collaborated with school systems and service providers to provide wrap around services to families. Below are a few examples of impact using our education pathway:

RESULTS – EXAMPLES

Early Learning & Kindergarten Readiness – Bienville Basin (the former Iberville Public Housing community) is the location where our staff continue to provide individualized, family centered supports to ensure that residents are best positioned to achieve success and self-sufficiency. To ensure that families with children 0-5 get a healthy start, we partner with Nurse-Family Partnership, a national program that empowers first-time moms to transform their lives and create better futures for themselves and their babies. In this program, specially trained nurses regularly visit moms to be, starting early in the pregnancy and continuing through the child’s second birthday. Fifty-nine (59) families are being assessed for possible enrollment in this research-based program. In 2002, Louisiana’s infant mortality rate was 10.2 per 1,000 live births. In Iberville Parish, the rate was 9.5 per 1,000 live births. Infant mortality rates differ by race. In 2002, the black infant mortality rate in Louisiana was just over two times the rate for white infants.
**Proficiency in Reading and Math** - In Bienville Basin, we partner with Prime Time, Inc. The organization implements Prime Time Family Literacy program designed to engage 10-25 families and their 3- to 10-year-old children in reading and discussion. The program offers family bonding through literature at home, and builds the foundation for a lifelong love of reading. It takes place in one 90-minute session per week for six weeks, held between 4:30 and 7:00 PM. A storyteller reads beautifully illustrated, award-winning children’s books that consist of culturally diverse stories from around the world—spanning fairy tales, folk tales, fables, historical accounts, and other narratives of real-life circumstances that are familiar to adults and children alike. The discussion leader or scholar then guides the group to personally connect with literature and think beyond considerations of who, what, when, and where by applying the Socratic method of open-ended questioning. Over 30 families in Bienville Basin benefit from the program and the partnership we orchestrated.

**College and Career Ready** - Based on 22 students who lived in Alice Griffith and entered 9th grade in 2011-2012, 41% graduated in four years, 32% dropped out and 27% moved or are still enrolled. Based on 37 students who lived in Alice Griffith and entered 9th grade in 2012-2013, 30% graduated in four year, 3% dropped out and 68% moved or are still enrolled. Of twelve (12) students who began 9th grade and graduated in four years in May 2016, 8 graduated with a GPA above 2.5 making them eligible for admission to University of California system, 4 had GPAs above 3.0, 3 students failed classes. All of these students recovered and were able to graduate on time with their classmates in May 2016. Two of the 12 students maintained a GPA above 3.0 for every semester of their high school years and two more students had only one semester below a 3.0 GPA. Of the 12 students, 9 completed high school with no suspensions or disciplinary infractions, 8 maintained an attendance rate of above 85%, and 4 of those 9 maintained an attendance rate above 90% throughout high school. Nine matriculated to college, two to the University of California system, one went out of state to Xavier University and one to the California State University System.

**Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism** - In order for students to succeed, they must show up to school ready to learn. Bret Harte Elementary, the school with the largest population of Alice Griffith students enrolled (39 students from Alice Griffith out of 216 students school wide from 2014-2016) showed significant decreases in percentage of students chronically absent school wide, from 31% in 2014/2015 to 25.3% in 2015/2016. We have partnered with multiple schools to implement operational attendance campaigns designed in collaboration with the “Attendance Works” National Attendance Improvement Group to address chronic absenteeism. Students are monitored, encouraged, and rewarded for improved attendance in assemblies, with daily encouragement from their teachers.

**In School and After School Programs** - Several years ago we started Youth-Plan (Y-Plan) at Joseph S. Clark Preparatory High School in New Orleans. It is an initiative spearheaded by the University of California-Berkeley that aims to engage youth in their communities by creating youth led projects and initiatives. In March we targeted students at Clark High School though in-school and after-school programming. The students decided to create their own foundation for entrepreneurship, civic engagement and youth leadership which they named Clark Creative
Minds. Clark Creative Minds collaborates with the City of New Orleans’ Network for Economic Opportunity (The Network) and the National Organization for Minority Architects (NOMA) from the planning stage to the execution of group projects and initiatives. The students have played vital roles in the creation of the youth space in the Cultural Pavilion and the Youth Segment of the Treme/7th Ward Festival (T7 Fest) which are initiatives of the City of New Orleans. To date 8 participants will lead businesses which include food ventures, t-shirt shops, and a social media campaign that will be produced with the assistance of their peers who also attend Clark High School.

LESSONS LEARNED

Below are a few lessons we have distilled from our education work over the past years.

- **Family and Staff Mobility** - It is easier to connect children and youth that live in public housing than it is to connect children and youth with a Housing Choice Voucher to educational opportunities due to the fixed location of public housing. Now that youth are spread out, our new model requires our staff to be mobile with access to LEARN (our technology-based case management system) at all times in order to capture data in real-time and to connect with education providers in real time.

- **Barrier Removal** – Family mobility affects a child’s education; therefore, barrier removal support is critical for children to be successful in school. For instance, some youth move temporarily from the neighborhood school to allow for redevelopment to occur, then move back to the redeveloped site. While uncoordinated and untimely residential movement disrupts the stability of a child’s education, it happens. To this end, our barrier removal supports children to successfully complete their school year with minimal to no disruption.

- **Partnerships with School Districts** - Working with school districts in order to track student outcomes across multiple schools is essential but hard. Sharing student information with other service sectors is often difficult for school districts because of privacy rules. Fortunately, we have learned the steps to ameliorate this problem in communities where we work. Having a Memorandum of Agreement that includes data-sharing gives us access to aggregated data and disaggregated data by race, class, etc. Our families sign a Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) form that gives us access to their individual educational reports that inform how we support our students collectively and individually. Our partnership extends beyond data sharing.

- **Facilitation** – Turning to outside organizations to help provide the resources students need to be successful can sometimes create challenges for school districts and schools. Yet, there are a multitude of education providers in a single community wanting and available to serve youth. And even more, there is little communication and coordination between them. As a partner with the school district, we bring providers together to review and discuss data, align contributions and agree on what actions to take to improve education outcomes using our Results Count approach.

- **Case Management and Coaching** – Many of our children have experienced high levels of trauma and have complex needs. The necessity for training our staff on how to
recognize and address trauma in families has been a huge lesson learned. Developing trust and relationships with our families through case management and service coordination is crucial. Because they trust us, parents give us access to individual school level data that help us to tailor supports to meet each student’s unique and often complex needs.

EDUCATION INVESTMENT MODEL

CNI People resources available to USI amount to about $4.5M. Generally, this is allocated among three issues to support adult and children’s health, education and employment needs. With this limited resource, it is not feasible for us alone to address the myriad of issues that our families and children face so we prioritize based on need and community assets. We also actively seek to increase our funding to support our education work by diversifying our funding streams.

Based on the lessons learned, we have concluded that, to advance our education work, we will invest our organization’s social, moral, intellectual, reputational and financial capital in five key areas to improve educational results for families and children over the next five years.

1. **People** – Our work is about the PEOPLE. When parents do well, children do well. We will invest in opportunities to help improve educational outcomes for children and job opportunities for their parents at the same time.

2. **Place** – By strengthening our families and children, we are strengthening place. For example, a change in health can influence a student’s academic outcomes, and academic outcomes can influence the economic and social health of a community. Strong communities support strong families and vice versa. Both are necessary for the healthy development and success of our children. We will invest resources in opportunities that help strengthen place, including increasing civic engagement among families.

3. **Partnerships** – No one organization can solve the many challenges our families face. We recognize the role that education organizations play in community and schools, and we seek to partner with those that meet these criteria: provide evidence-based programs, can fill gaps, build community capacity, advance policy and assist with securing funding to deliver services. We are close to the public housing children and families we serve with deep and documented understanding of their assets, challenges, needs and aspirations.
4. **Performance Measures** – Results count! We measure what we treasure using data to inform decision-making and make continuous improvements.

5. **Public Systems** - Our parents tell us how hard it is to navigate the current education landscape. On a regular basis, we hear parents complain about what is not working and what needs to change. They talk about the continual change in school leadership, school policy changes, change in School Choice options, and the impact of funding reductions on their children. While they come to us for service linkages and support, it is imperative that parents are trained on how to elevate their leadership to improve not only the education system, but also other public systems that impact their families.

**CONCLUSION**

The overwhelming majority of public housing authorities in the nation today are very small. Nearly 88% of them own public housing of 500 or fewer units. According to the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities, 850,000 children live in public housing, representing 41% of all public housing residents in the nation. Of the 850,000 children, we serve only a small fraction in our communities. As children relocate from public housing, their families receive assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher program. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, more than 5 million people use vouchers. 70% of voucher recipients are in families with children.

Of the number of children we serve, more than 58% of the children we support are school ages 6-18; the others are ages 0-5. Racially, 80% are African American, 14% are Caucasian, and 5% are other including Hispanics, American Indian, and Asian. Overwhelmingly, the student population that we serve are poor growing up in blighted neighborhoods.

The Urban Strategies team continues to believe that an education is an esteemed commodity. Not only for the children and families we serve, but also for USI’s staff. By all accounts, we have learned some hard lessons over many years of experience working on the ground in under resourced neighborhoods. Like the children and families we serve, USI is a resilient organization with a team that is equipped with the competencies necessary to accelerate results for the children and families. Going forward, as we support children and families in reaching their fullest potential, we will intentionally base our decisions on data, recognize and act on disparities as appropriate, use our influence to impact systems change and align our contributions in collaboration with others to improve results.