

Hygiene of Housing

Contribution of the American Public Health Association to Housing Evaluation *

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THE Federal Housing Act of 1949 is providing new stimulation to local slum clearance and blight elimination programs. In several communities the local health departments are working side by side with other agencies to determine where available housing funds should be spent to do the greatest overall good for their communities. This participation has resulted from the Association's development of housing survey and evaluation procedures.

In view of the wording of the federal housing law it is natural that health departments should participate in these programs. Congress, in its "Declaration of Policy" said it is necessary "to remedy the unsafe and insanitary housing conditions . . . injurious to the health, safety and morals of the citizens of the nation." Health departments that conduct active housing enforcement programs are definitely brought into the picture by Section 10 of the Federal Act. This provides that the governing body of the community shall enter into agreement with the local housing agency, to the effect that within five years after completion of low-rent housing projects there will have been eliminated by demolition, condemnation, effective closing, or compulsory repair or improve-

ment, unsafe or insanitary dwelling units substantially equal in number to the new units provided by such projects.

Acceptance of the aims of public health as outlined in a frequently quoted definition to involve ". . . promoting physical and mental health and efficiency . . .," automatically causes us to accept housing improvement as a definite public health responsibility. In keeping with the phrase of the definition ". . . through organized community efforts," the Association's housing evaluation program incorporates the principle of teamwork between the various interested official agencies.

From the standpoint of the health department, housing surveys provide a wealth of valuable information concerning environmental conditions in older areas where sanitation problems are apt to be most acute. The survey data show the extent to which premises and living quarters are infested with rats and rodents. An accurate picture is made available to the health officer or sanitation administrator who wishes to know the extent of overcrowding, plumbing stoppages, garbage and waste accumulations, and other general insanitary conditions in the surveyed area. In some communities the survey data have shown the need for improving housing and general sanitation legislation and convinced the governing bodies of the need for additional inspection personnel.

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The most important benefit to the health department program results from making available suitable low-rent, public housing units for families which must be vacated from unfit dwellings. In Los Angeles the City Housing Authority has requested the Health Department to survey the dwelling units of all applicants who request public units on the grounds that their existing quarters are unfit. These surveys would be made in accordance with the standard Association evaluation schedules. This type of program should go a long way toward preventing or disproving claims that units are being assigned on the basis of favoritism. When the health department certifies that a family's quarters are so unfit that a public unit should be assigned, it can justify the prompt invoking of its legal authority to post condemnation and vacating signs so that the building cannot be reoccupied. In cooperation with the building department, many such buildings can be demolished. Some will revert to their original intended use as garages, sheds, retail stores, etc. Others will be repaired and renovated. This program is in keeping with Dr. Winslow's statement, "It cannot be too strongly emphasized that rehabilitation of existing bad housing is limited in its applicability by fundamental economic law; that demolition of existing bad housing does not help the unfortunate tenants unless they have good housing into which they can move. The negative approach of condemnation must go hand-in-hand with the positive task of rebuilding our cities and our countryside."

Teamwork is sure to develop wherever the Association's evaluation program is utilized. This begins when the interested official agencies meet to decide what type of information each desires; what are the aims and objectives of each; in which areas should studies be made.

The contribution of the Association in selecting areas and in the entire plan-

ning for community improvement is covered in a statement by the Los Angeles Director of City Planning, Charles B. Bennett.

"From the standpoint of the Los Angeles City Planning Commission, the contribution of the American Public Health Association in evolving a new technique for housing evaluation has proved of tremendous value. Whereas the former methods of using data developed by the United States Census Bureau, and the local health, police, probation, and social service agencies, were helpful in ascertaining the general locations of slum and blighted areas, the new procedures of the A.P.H.A. have refined the process to the extent that substandard areas can be 'pinpointed' and the precise degree and extent of blight and slum conditions are readily determined.

"The chief difficulties in the past were the defining of the exact boundaries of the blighted areas, and the assembly of sufficient pertinent information that would establish the indisputable presence of blight. Most of the available statistics had previously been gathered on a census tract or block basis, which did not generally lend toward precise findings for portions of census tracts or blocks. Furthermore, the data were frequently of a haphazard character, and not sufficiently complete for the intended purpose.

"The housing appraisal technique of the Committee on the Hygiene of Housing of the American Public Health Association has overcome the failings of the earlier methods. A field check is made of every structure and dwelling unit within a study area, during which a careful inspection and analysis is made of physical and environmental conditions. Supplementary information is likewise obtained directly from the occupants, relative to essential social and economic characteristics prevailing within the study area, including such factors as rent, incomes, ownership, occupancy, etc.

"In view of the necessity of establishing the validity of condemnation proceedings in court, it is of extreme importance that, first, the supporting data be accurate and conclusive; and, second, they be presented in a manner to be readily grasped and understood.

"The Planning Department staff has prepared a series of maps and charts for each study area. These incorporate the findings of the field surveys and clearly outline the location and show the extent of blighting influences and substandard housing within the respective areas. Since all the information presented is based upon the standards estab-

lished by the Association and can be substantiated by referral to the original field records, these exhibits should bear great weight in a court test.

"While the survey method is of particular concern in housing and community redevelopment studies, it also has a direct relationship to many other functions of the City Planning Commission. For example, it helps in the determination of the most appropriate land use of an area; i.e., whether it should be used for residential, commercial, or industrial purposes. Once the study areas have been properly evaluated, the boundaries of the proposed redevelopment or housing areas delineated, the Planning Commission is in far better position to plan for essential utilities and public improvements such as major highways and freeway routes, schools, recreational areas, police and fire stations, and a wide variety of other municipal facilities.

"Through refinement of the technique of housing evaluation, the American Public Health Association deserves the gratitude of all those who desire to eliminate unhealthful conditions and make ever better and more wholesome cities in which to raise our families."

In every community there are organized groups who strongly oppose public housing. Residents of areas selected for slum clearance promptly and publicly deny that their neighborhood is of slum character. The ways in which the Association's evaluation procedures help the Housing Authority, in these and other problems, is covered in the following statement from the Los Angeles City Housing Authority's Executive Director, Howard L. Holtzendorff.

"When the Housing Authority began its search for the best possible sites on which to locate 10,000 units of low-rent public housing, it was faced with a dilemma. Accurate and detailed information on all proposed sites was essential before final selections could be made. However, any survey conducted by the Housing Authority would have exposed the entire program to attack because charges of bias would have been made and would have been difficult to refute.

"The American Public Health Association technique of conducting the required survey solved the problem. The use of the name of the American Public Health Association lent prestige to the entire project and gained almost

universal acceptance of the findings. More than that, it brought together local community agencies to work in close coöperation on the job.

"Actually, it is difficult to decide in which phase of the Authority's program the American Public Health Association technique will prove most valuable. The findings have played an important part in almost every decision so far, and it is anticipated that they will prove just as valuable in the subsequent stages.

"Without the detailed analysis of each structure in every block of the proposed areas, selections of final site boundaries would have been difficult, if not impossible. At the very least, the knowledge that its decisions are backed by sound scientific data makes it possible for the Authority to present its program to the public with complete confidence. The accurate, well organized data give a firm foundation for any legal defense which may prove necessary.

"The social information furnished through the survey has proved, and is proving, equally valuable. The Authority has been able to plan the number of three, four, and five bedroom dwelling units which will be necessary in the new developments. This would have been impossible if the information on the sizes of families were not available from the survey.

"Again, in its relocation program, the Authority, as a result of the survey, is in possession of vitally necessary information. It knows the number of families eligible for public housing and those who are not eligible. It knows the number of standard homes in the areas and the incomes of the families. Relocation plans can be made in advance on the basis of this information without conducting any further investigations.

"In short, the American Public Health Association technique has made it possible to approach a tremendous task in a scientific manner. The Authority is now in a position to do not only a quantitative job, but a qualitative one as well."

Federal housing legislation establishes the principle that wherever possible, private industry should be encouraged and helped in its development of housing projects. Certain slum and blighted areas may be acquired by local redevelopment or land clearance agencies, cleared, and then leased or sold for redevelopment by private organizations. Redevelopment of such areas must be in accordance with the approved master

plan of the community. The Executive Director of the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles, Percival G. Hart, for whom surveys were made of tenements in blighted districts of the central metropolitan area and of mixtures of industrial, commercial, and residential areas in railroad districts, said:

"By virtue of the authority vested in the Health Department to enter onto and investigate the condition of property, and in view of the experiences gained in the past use of survey techniques developed for measuring the quality of housing and the living environment, the statistical information furnished by the Health Department is the most authoritative source on which the agency can base many of its studies and recommendations.

"The acquisition of property for a redevelopment project must be preceded by public hearings in which it is definitely shown that the area being condemned is blighted and that its redevelopment is in the interest of the health, safety, and general welfare of the people of the community. The reasons for such acquisition must be clearly stated and backed by specific information with reference to the health and sanitary conditions of the area as a whole, as determined by a survey of each dwelling unit in the area, so as to prove beyond a shadow of doubt the necessity for redevelopment. Therefore, our first step in a redevelopment project is to use studies, made in accordance with Association procedures, as the basis of conclusions for needed action.

"Another way in which these studies form a necessary part of the program is in formulating plans for the rehousing of displaced site occupants. The data furnished with reference to the family structure of the various inhabitants of the dwelling units, including their incomes, areas of employment, and similar data of this nature, give the necessary information to plans for relocation."

The 1950 census data will provide far more accurate housing information, on a nation-wide basis, than was formerly available. This is due to adoption by the U. S. Bureau of Census of certain fundamentals, indices, descriptions, and illustrations of dilapidation, from the Association's evaluation procedures. For the Los Angeles area, arrangements were made by the Housing Authority for

the Health Department's housing supervisor, Joseph Sollins, to be appointed a special agent of the Census Bureau. In this capacity he participated in the program of training census bureau personnel in applying the housing criteria, and made certain spot checks to determine that enumerators were correctly applying the standards in collecting housing data.

Health officers, as members of the communities' housing teams, can also lend their prestige and support to securing improved housing regulations. When the surveys show that blight and slum development are promoted by poor zoning, planning, or building regulations, they can vigorously support necessary legislation to prevent the spread of blight. Sanitation program administrators can gear their maintenance programs to the findings of the surveys. This may lead to improved maintenance and occupancy laws. Areas indicated for early slum clearance will not be subject to the same permanent improvement requirements as other areas which are determined to be "salvageable" without major clearance or redevelopment. The close association with the local housing authority, developed through application of evaluation procedures, establishes channels whereby eligible families found by the health departments to require eviction from unfit quarters, may be given priorities for placement in low-rent public housing units. Coöperation with redevelopment agencies may lead to the elimination of some of our worst housing conditions in tenement and rooming house areas, or in those worst housing areas where aged and neglected dwellings are interspersed between junkyards and gas plants.

Improved public health and sanitation are usually the main "sales arguments" for slum clearance, redevelopment, and low-rent public housing. The Association has made a real contribution by providing to health officials a procedure

whereby housing and environment may be precisely measured to provide the authoritative data so necessary to gain community support for eliminating our

worst housing conditions; to plan and organize for action which will raise the housing standards of our communities.

New Publicity Council Service

To help health, social, and recreation workers in the selection and purchase of printed materials, the National Publicity Council for Health and Welfare Services has inaugurated a new central distribution service on books and pamphlets useful in public education, public relations, and community organization programs. New publications from a wide variety of sources are screened for their usefulness either as reference material for personnel, or as material for distribution to the public. Suitable publi-

cations are described in announcements sent periodically to interested agencies and individuals. A further service is that purchasers can get through the council—via a single order blank—any of the books and pamphlets listed, thus making it unnecessary to deal with separate publishers.

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