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Supportive, affordable housing essential to making Atlanta humane

Filed under: [Guest Columns](#) — Maria Saporta @ 6:09 pm

By Guest Columnist **BRUCE GUNTER**, founder and president of *Progressive Redevelopment Inc.*

Lost in the understandable focus on the meltdown in the single-family housing market is the everyday truth that Atlanta has a galling lack of affordable housing for those with very low incomes.

Most of the very affordable housing stock that we do have is rental, and much of it is scattered around the region in apartment complexes in varying degrees of repair. Even as the drop in for-sale housing prices renders single family housing more affordable (a very good thing), quality rental housing remains out of reach for many who live on incomes below \$35,000. This is not a minor matter to this part of the population that resides in a city that remains stubbornly poor.



As a region, our housing priorities must be to first stem the tide of foreclosures, setting the stage for a return to normalcy in the single-family market.

However, we must also recognize that many families and individuals depend on decent and affordable rental housing. The rental sector has not been spared during the housing and financial crisis.

Lenders and investors are leery of placing capital into the multifamily sector, no matter how great the demand or need. Owners of multi-family housing are suffering from the largest vacancy and delinquency figures in almost 25 years, as the prolonged impact of the recession erodes the financial wherewithal of residents.

At the lowest end of the permanent housing spectrum (as distinct from shelters), housing for very-low income persons or those formerly homeless has evolved from purely "transitional" housing to what is known as "supportive housing."

This housing, as the name implies, combines quality and affordable housing with on-site resident supportive services targeted to the specific needs of the resident base.

Communities all across the country have embraced this new way of thinking about housing for this population for a simple reason: it works.

In fact, Horace Sibley, in a recent article in the Atlanta Business Chronicle, noted that the efforts of the Regional Commission on Homelessness are centered on creating more supportive housing for women with children, for individuals battling mental illness or other physical ailments, and for other special needs populations.

The Department of Community Affairs, which coordinates housing policy and funding for the state, has a well-developed program to promote supportive housing.

Supportive services get at the cause of homelessness, and on-site delivery is a very efficient way of reaching this population. Leaving aside the obvious humanitarian preference and personal benefits of a decent place to live, on a purely cost-benefit basis, the direct cost of supportive housing is much less than the higher cost alternative forms of housing — the emergency room at Grady Hospital, the municipal jails, and other grim places where our society has relegated people who have no place to call home.

When individuals who sincerely want to improve their lives and put the work required into doing so are matched up in supportive housing facilities, the results are encouraging and belie the tag of "hopeless."

Progressive Redevelopment Inc. (PRI) this week is celebrating more than 20 years of helping provide housing for low-to-moderate income individuals and families. PRI is the largest independent, nonprofit developer of affordable housing in Georgia.

Since 1987, PRI has developed 2,400 units in 33 properties throughout Georgia serving more than 6,500 households. Currently, PRI has more than 500 units under development, with a collective total cost of \$50 million.

In downtown Atlanta, PRI owns and operates three supportive housing facilities. All three are directed toward individuals yet each facility is targeted to a slightly different population. Hope House, the Imperial on Peachtree, and the Welcome House collectively house almost 400 individuals.

Were it not for these well-run facilities, a goodly number of our residents would be in dire straits for housing. Each facility is staffed by property management and social workers whose charge is the day by day improvement of residents' quality of life, as they make their way back from mental illness, drug or alcohol abuse or other afflictions and / or work to gain new skills and insights allowing them to achieve more economic independence.

The combination of affordable housing and skilled case manager / counselors is what makes supportive housing so very different.

Our city must do better by its very low income citizens. We know it is possible to do so, and we know the economic and humanitarian benefits make supportive housing a good investment.