Bringing Afterschool Home

OST Programming in Affordable Housing Communities

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When the bell rings at the end of the school day, many afterschool participants head to the cafeteria, gym, or portable building where their programs take place. Some hop on buses to attend programs at a local community or recreation center a few blocks away. However, thousands of students across the country go home to their afterschool program.

That's because their program is located in the apartment complex or housing community where they live. Afterschool programs in housing communities are much like school- or community-based programs. They offer academic assistance such as homework help and reading intervention, along with free healthy snacks or meals, enrichment programs, and fitness activities—just as any other afterschool program might. The main difference is that these programs are offered to participants where they live by the affordable housing organizations that manage their housing complexes.

The primary work of affordable housing organizations is to develop and manage housing for economically disadvantaged people who are underserved by the private market. In addition to housing, many offer other on-site services to enrich the lives of their residents. This model, termed "housing plus services," may include asset-building programs such as financial literacy classes, homebuyer education programs, income tax preparation assistance, and personal financial coaching. Health and wellness programming ranges from exercise groups to cooking classes to food pantries. The organizations work to build community by developing resident leaders and

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resident-led committees. Additionally, many provide educational opportunities: early childhood programs; college preparation for nontraditional students; and adult education programs such as English as a second language, digital literacy, and high school equivalency preparation. Out-of-school time (OST) programs are often part of this mix of support. Offering afterschool programming in the communities where families live helps to overcome some of the barriers that can keep low-income children from participating, such as transportation and scheduling issues.

I am the director of education for the nonprofit affordable housing organization Foundation Communities in Austin, Texas. As part of my National Afterschool Matters Fellowship, I conducted research on affordable housing organizations, including my own, that provide OST programs. I aimed to identify similarities and differences between these programs and other OST programs, the benefits they offer residents, and the challenges they encounter.

Methods

To learn what housing organizations are doing in OST education, in May 2018 I surveyed youth program providers from NeighborWorks America, a national network of 245 nonprofit affordable housing organizations. To help me determine whether the programs were run by the housing organizations themselves or by a partner, the survey asked about how the OST programs are managed. It included questions about the programs' size, focus (such as academic, recreational, or other), staffing, and funding; it also asked whether the programs were collecting student or other outcomes data. Program directors from 19 nonprofit housing organizations completed the survey.

Of those 19, I selected three organizations that managed their OST programs themselves, rather than relying on an outside partner: Blackstone River Valley in Woonsocket, Rhode Island; People's Self-Help Housing along the central coast of California; and my organization, Foundation Communities in Austin, Texas. I chose these organizations for their varied locations and for the similarities that emerged in their survey responses. All three emphasize academics as the focus of their afterschool and summer programs. All three have paid staff dedicated to their youth programs, a factor that enabled each organization to have a staff-to-student ratio of 1:15 or better. All three have varied funding streams, though their funding structures are different. All three also collect data on their students such as grades, program and school attendance, reading scores, and reading levels; each had worked with the local school to secure data-sharing agreements. Furthermore, all three are long-standing affordable housing organizations with 20-plus years of experience. All not only offer OST programs for children in grades K through 5 but also provide other services to residents, both youth and adult.

In addition to tapping my own experience as director of education of Foundation Communities, I interviewed Margaux Morisseau, director of community building and engagement at Blackstone, and Alejandra Mahoney, director of education for People's Self-Help, in June 2018. All three of us had, at the time of the interview, at least 12 years of experience as OST directors for our affordable housing organizations.

Context

Like affordable housing organizations across the country, the three I studied strive to meet needs of working families in their regions. Most of their housing communities are multifamily apartment complexes that offer affordable units for families with children as well as for senior adults, veterans, and single adults transitioning out of homelessness. All three serve diverse communities; large proportions of their OST program participants are English language learners. The services these organizations provide, including OST programs, help their residents deal with the many barriers to their success.

Blackstone provides both rental housing and opportunities for home ownership in three locations. Its 432 rental units house approximately 1,000 people. According to Morisseau, most residents are immigrants from West Africa, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, or Southeast Asia.

People's Self-Help provides 52 affordable housing communities for almost 5,500 individuals. Mahoney told me that the population is predominantly Latinx, including working poor families, single parents, elderly people on a fixed income, veterans, and persons with disabilities, including mental illness. Many formerly experienced homelessness.

Foundation Communities has 23 communities, housing over 7,000 families. Our population is a mix of Latinx, African American, and white people, with an increasing number of people from the Middle East. We provide special programming for families who are transitioning from homelessness.

Affordable Housing and Education

One thing I wanted to learn from this research is the impact of affordable housing on education and student achievement in general. Housing is a basic human need. The research shows that access to affordable, quality housing improves families' economic stability, employment, health, and educational achievement (Cunningham & McDonald, 2012). Affordable housing provides stability that can help prevent frequent moves and therefore lessen disruption in school attendance and learning (Brennan, 2011). Hypermobility, or frequent moves, leads to a decrease in student achievement, particularly when children have to change schools because of a residential move (Brennan, 2011). Lessening frequent moves for families—in other words, providing stable housing—seems likely to help students with challenges at school.

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The affordable housing providers I studied pair this housing stability with the support of a quality OST program to add to student success. Blackstone, People's Self-Help, and Foundation Communities all started afterschool programs when residents expressed a need for a safe place for their children while parents were working. Originally, these organizations provided drop-in programs that offered constructive activities. The goal was to keep children engaged after school in a supervised environment, deterring them from unsafe activities. Later, all three organizations provided more intentional OST programming to support young residents academically. All three have dedicated learning spaces, which are either stand-alone learning centers or converted apartments.

Morisseau said that Blackstone "saw the youth programs as a way to build relationships between the families and property management and staff, help working parents, and keep maintenance costs down by keeping youth busy and supervised." Fifteen years ago, Blackstone decided to formalize the program by offering academic-based OST programming. Morisseau described Blackstone's OST site as a "walk-to center" in the middle of the organization's housing communities.

People's Self-Help began its afterschool programs 16 years ago after parents in the community expressed a need for help with their children's homework. In her interview, Mahoney said that the founding executive director "saw the importance of academic achievement as part of an effort to stop generational poverty." Today, People's Self-Help has 11 designated learning centers serving 170 children.

Similarly, Foundation Communities began its afterschool program at one location over 20 years ago as a drop-in program that provided a safe space with some basic homework help and arts and crafts activities. The program has evolved to provide more academic support and structured activities. As the organization continues to build new housing, it has committed to including a learning center and afterschool programming in each community. Its 14 learning centers serve 600 elementary-aged participants, with another 300 children in pre-K and in middle and high school programs.

OST Program Offerings

Studies have demonstrated that afterschool programs require a number of components in order to have an impact. These include "a safe environment, academically enriching activities, mentors who care about [participants] and who they can look up to, healthy snacks and meals, and opportunities for physical activity" (Afterschool Alliance, 2016, p. 4). To meet these needs, the three housing organizations' programs have evolved to offer academic assistance for young people and support for families. All three offer homework assistance, skill-building academic activities during the summer, a reading support program, health and fitness programming, and a varied menu of enrichment activities including arts, music, cooking, technology, and other interests. These programs have emerged from the commitment of the housing organization leaders to prioritize the academic achievement of youth residents. Success factors include support from varied funding sources, the dedication of program directors and staff, and partnerships with local agencies and school districts. As Morisseau said of Blackstone, "We have evolved over time, strengthening our programs and diversifying our funding."

Blackstone's OST programming annually serves

100 young people, kindergarten through college age, in its three housing communities. A variety of classes are offered by paid program staff, some of whom are certified teachers, as well as by instructors such as a chef, musicians, a philosopher, and artists. The program focuses on academic support and enrichment to create "college-ready communities," according to Morisseau. "Blackstone River is dedicated to supporting youth as they work towards higher education and supporting parents to ensure their children are in high-quality programs while they are at work, sometimes working two or three jobs." Blackstone partners with Head Start to offer programming for early learners. Children in grades K through 5 attend the Art Center, "a highly rated certified childcare center," according to Morisseau. Older students have the C3 Center, "a specially designed community learning center that has served as a national model for sustainable youth programming." Both centers stay open year-round, offering full-day programming during summer and other vacation times. Blackstone also offers a college club for young adults.

People's Self-Help OST programs for elementary-aged children focus on literacy and math, Mahoney said, using web-based curricula to support learning. The programs, which are open five days a week, also provide homework help, outdoor recreational activities, and enrichment. "Our programs develop differentiated curriculum," Mahoney said, "including social-emotional learning." A key component of the programs is support to parents "as a liaison between home and school." For example, OST educators attend parent-teacher conferences to help with translations and with any requests parents have for the school. For older students, grades 7 through 12 and beyond, People's Self-Help offers a college club that provides college counseling, assistance with financial aid and admissions, test preparation, and other supports. Mahoney emphasized that the OST program continues to work with participants who move out of the housing community, if they want the assistance.

OST programs for children in grades K through 5 at Foundation Communities include academic assistance, enrichment activities, reading support, and physical fitness programming. We also created curricula for our elementary-aged children that focus on the environment, sustainability, and healthy choices. For pre-K children, we partner with the local school district to provide programs at two of our communities. Our programming for young people in middle and high school provides academic support and college and career exploration. Free Minds, a humanities course provided in partnership with local colleges, gives older students the opportunity to earn college credit.

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All three organizations have been involved in efforts to standardize the quality of youth programs in affordable housing communities. Partnership for Children and Youth has led one effort, called HousED, to establish standards for quality expanded learning programs for youth in public and affordable housing communities. The initiative includes assessing quality and providing professional development on quality standards for program staff (Partnership for Children and Youth, n.d.). HousED is supporting the work of OST programs in the NeighborWorks network by providing site observations, feedback, assessment tools, and training.

In addition, all three organizations I studied are part of a cohort of housing providers called H-PASS (Housing as a Platform for Academic Success) who are using a common online reading platform, supported by the NeighborWorks network. The goal is to ensure that all participants are reading on grade level by third grade. The broader idea is to see how housing-based afterschool activities can be a platform for academic success. These efforts around standardization and reading support show how affordable housing organizations are working to provide quality OST programs that have positive effects on young residents' academic performance.

Benefits of OST Programming in Affordable Housing Communities

Bringing afterschool home to the affordable housing communities where low-income families live has some clear advantages for participants, families, the programs, and the housing communities.

Accessibility

All OST programs and other services in the affordable housing communities are conveniently located. Accessibility is often a barrier to OST participation, particularly for young people in low-income areas. The Afterschool Alliance (2016) found that "More than 2 out of 3 parents living in communities of concentrated poverty (67 percent) report that finding an enriching environment for their child in the after school hours was a challenge, compared to 46 percent of parents living outside of these areas" (p. 7). OST programs in affordable housing communities help to fulfill this need.

School-based afterschool programs are convenient, as students can simply stay to participate after school dismisses. However, the schedules of school-based programs do not always align with families' work schedules, and some do not provide transportation home. The programs in housing communities easily resolve the transportation problem: Participants either ride the school bus home, where they are delivered to their OST programs, or they walk home from school. Foundation Communities, for example, provides a supervised walk from school to the OST program. When programs dismiss at 6 p.m., youth can walk back to their apartments, or family members can easily pick them up.

Affordability

OST programs and childcare often are not affordable for low-income families. According to the Afterschool Alliance (2016), "More than 6 in 10 parents living in communities of concentrated poverty (61 percent) agree that economic conditions have made it difficult for them to afford placing their child in an afterschool program" (p. 8).

The three housing organizations in my study address this issue by offering their OST programs free of charge to their families. A unique source of funding for these organizations is rental revenue. All three of the affordable housing organizations I studied use rental income to partially support their programs. Including this income in their diversified funding structures enhances the sustainability of these organizations' OST and other programs.

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The OST programs at Blackstone are fee-based. However, all parents qualify for state childcare vouchers that cover the program fees. Morisseau told me that 75 percent of the funding for Blackstone's OST programs comes from the state. Another 20 percent is provided by private foundations; the final 5 percent is rental income. Morisseau said that this funding structure "ensures that we can sustain our youth programs over time."

People's Self-Help also uses a combination of funding sources to provide OST programming at no charge to residents, according to Mahoney: half from grants, about 20 percent from rental revenue, 20 percent from other revenue, and 10 percent from private donations.

At Foundation Communities, our free OST programming is supported by a diverse funding base. Approximately 8 percent of our funding comes from the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. About 15 percent is city and county funding, 25 percent from private foundations, and 15 percent from other grants. The rest comes from individual donations and rental revenue.

Consistent Attendance

Regular participation in afterschool programs "has been shown to help students improve their work habits and demonstrate higher levels of persistence" (Afterschool Alliance, 2016, p. 4). Consistent attendance thus "helps to close the achievement gap that exists between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers" (Afterschool Alliance, 2016, p. 4). A study published by the Center for Housing Policy notes that "Residential-based afterschool programs have a number of potential advantages over school-based programs" (Brennan, 2011, p. 4), including eliminating the need for transportation, providing a safe space in high-crime neighborhoods, and giving families a convenient OST option in their own home communities (Brennan, 2011).

During my 18 years at Foundation Communities, I have observed that young people's attendance in our OST programs seems to be more regular than at the school-based programs where I have worked. In school-based afterschool programs, I often struggled to enroll enough students. At Foundation, many parents are eager to enroll their children. In fact, the property management staff told me that our free afterschool program was definitely a "selling point" when leasing to new residents. Last year, about 60 percent of our 600 elementary-aged participants attended the programs consistently, at least three days a week. One reason is trust: Participants live in the community where their afterschool program is located, often for several years. Accessibility is another reason that participants show consistent attendance.

Retention

Participant retention may also be of less concern for housing-based OST programs than for many others. How long young people participate may correlate with how long their families live in the community—and many families live in affordable housing communities for several years. I observe that Foundation Communities OST participants tend to stick around longer than students in the school-based programs where I used to work. Because we provide a pipeline of educational services for young people from early childhood through college, we often see children grow up in the program.

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Similarly, Morisseau told me that most participants in Blackstone's OST programs "stay all of the way through." She said that, according to census data, residents stay in Blackstone communities twice as long as in other rental communities in the area. Blackstone staff believe that on-site services, including OST programs, are part of the reason for this success.

When I talked with her, Alejandra Mahoney of People's Self Help was tracking a group of students who began in the organization's youth programs in kindergarten. The participants in this "cohort," as she proudly calls them, have now graduated from high school; a large majority are currently enrolled in or have completed college. Some have returned to work in the youth programs back home, where younger participants value them as role models. Mahoney says, "Because of the stability of our residents, we can assist and track them until they graduate from college." The success of these young people in graduating from high school and then from college stems in part from the support offered to both parents and children by their housing communities. The OST programs have provided a foundation for academic success and have developed a culture of educational attainment. Mahoney said, "The expectation is set, and the supports in these communities are there for them to achieve it."

Family and Community Engagement

Family engagement is a crucial component of student success. All three of the youth program providers in my study emphasized that program staff have regular contact with parents because the programs are in the communities where the parents live. All believe that their programs help bridge the gap between school and home by supporting parents to become more involved in their children's education.

Alejandra Mahoney told me that parents are very involved in the OST program at People's Self-Help. She said that the staff are invested in the families and therefore have an edge over school staff in communicating with parents. "We know [the families'] traditions; we know their community." By contrast, she said, her friends who are teachers say that they are "lucky if they know the parents."

At Foundation Communities, a staff family engagement specialist provides resources and tools for parents, serves as liaison between families and the school, and sponsors monthly family nights in which parents and children can learn together. The goal is to make our learning centers feel family-friendly and inviting to parents.

Community Benefits

The programming these affordable housing organizations provide is beneficial to more than just the residents. One example is the fact that some

housing organizations offer OST programming to youth outside the housing community, when space and staffing allow. In Foundation Communities programs, about 70 percent of participants are residents, and about 30 percent live in surrounding neighborhoods. Most attend the same schools as our residents and, like them, need academic support and a safe place to go after school. Extending the program to children outside the housing community serves families in nearby neighborhoods and enables us to strengthen relationships with the local schools.

Overcoming Challenges

Affordable housing organizations have an edge over other OST providers in addressing some of the barriers to participation that low-income families face. Still, they face common challenges, including funding, attendance, staffing, and family engagement. In response, they have found ways to combat these challenges, many of which are unique to housing-based providers.

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As their OST programs grow and expand, housing organizations, like OST providers everywhere, need to fund their programs in sustainable ways. Funding for quality programs for middle and high school participants is a particular challenge. The OST providers I interviewed have found strategic ways to ensure sustainability by diversifying funding sources, including, in the case of Blackstone, use of state childcare vouchers. Housing organizations also have a source of funding that is not available to other OST providers: rental revenue from the housing itself.

Though housing-based programs have clear advantages in connecting with youth and families, enrollment and attendance can still be issues. Some parents simply may not be interested, particularly if an adult is home after school and someone can help the child with homework. Another factor is the emergence of charter schools, which often have a longer school day than neighborhood schools. At Foundation Communities, our afterschool programs are almost over by the time some charter school students return home. Though we would like to enroll every young resident, we have set a goal to enroll 75 percent of resident youth in OST programs.

The three program directors in my study agreed that competitive pay for frontline staff and staff retention are common issues, as they are for many youth program providers across the country. To attract and retain staff, the program directors look for opportunities to promote part-time frontline staff to full-time positions in order to provide consistency for participants and to retain quality staff. Another staff retention strategy, one that is unique to housing organizations, is the ability to provide staff with housing. Blackstone River Valley, according to Margaux Morisseau, has set aside six apartments for OST educators. In exchange for at least 16 hours per week at the afterschool center, instructional staff can live on-site at an affordable rate. At Foundation Communities, staff can live in the affordable housing community with a rent discount after six months of employment. Such housing opportunities are helpful for nonprofit staff, many of whom are attending college.

Despite the advantages of being physically close to the families, parent engagement is still challenging for housing-based OST programs. Most Foundation Communities learning centers have a core group of parents who participate consistently, but we would like to get more participation from more families. One strategy we use is offering varied opportunities for parents to get involved. In addition to attending our family events, they can help at one of our learning centers or take part in fitness or adult education programs for themselves. We highlight these opportunities so that parents feel welcomed and excited to participate with their children.

Stability, Relationships, and a Holistic Approach

The benefits of providing OST programs in affordable housing communities are clear. The housing itself provides much-needed stability for families. Reducing the number of moves a family must make prevents students from losing valuable time in school.

Furthermore, being located right in the families' home communities makes the OST programs accessible to resident youth. That accessibility, paired with housing stability and the organizations' ability to offer free programs, means that young people often participate for many years in the OST programs. Long-standing relationships with caring adults have an impact on participants' academic success and life choices. At all three organizations in my study, some long-term participants who went on to college have returned to work in the program, serving as role models for younger children. Another factor in the programs' success is that the housing organizations take a holistic approach by offering programs and services for the entire family, from early childhood programs to classes for adult learners and health and wellness programs for whole families.

All three of the program directors in my study have had long careers with our affordable housing organizations. We all are still passionate about this work. We find it rewarding because we feel we are making an impact on the young people we serve, their families, and the housing communities. Alejandra Mahoney of People's Self-Help summed it up when she said that bringing afterschool home "is the most effective way to support students and families with flexibility, intention, and integrity. I feel that we have been able to make a change using direction from our communities. And that is why I love my work."

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