

POAH RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

OPPORTUNITY AREAS



Preservation of
Affordable Housing

OCTOBER 2021

OPPORTUNITY AREAS

- 01 Encourage Community Care
- 02 Redefine Leadership
- 03 Strengthen Workplace Collaboration
- 04 Organizational Support for Burnout
- 05 Prioritize Healing
- 06 Address Community Trauma
- 07 Communicate Dignity and Belonging

TAPPING INTO OUR STRENGTHS

We are more resilient when we can use our strengths and experiences to help our communities. When we can use our strengths, we feel like we have the power to transform our circumstances. Tapping our strengths requires resources, trust, and autonomy from the people and organizations around us. But if we can develop our strengths, we're building a healthy foundation to fall back on when life gets difficult.

01 ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY CARE

POAH staff and residents find ways to care for each other — large and small. These communities of support help us deal with challenges as they come. They also take the pressure off the caregivers in our lives, including staff and residents who take care of others. Community support requires time and resources, but **when we invest in community care, we may also reduce requests to POAH staff and better equip staff and residents to deal with emergencies.**

How might we encourage community care at POAH?

01 ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY CARE

- A resident currently in school for social work noticed that her neighbors need mental health support. She offered to do onsite counseling or help with case management.
- Neighbors in one building formed their own resident group. They do a neighborhood watch, host a Secret Santa gift exchange, and give each other rides.
- Some properties don't have community rooms or spaces to get together. COVID canceled many of the programs where residents and staff could get to know each other.
- A staff member recalled at her old job, her office was in the resident's building. Because she saw them all the time, she knew all the residents - their habits and lifestyles, knew when someone might seem off. At POAH, **she can only get to know residents if they come to the office.**

IDEA FROM A RESIDENT **COMMUNITY MOVIE NIGHTS**

Even if you don't get a chance to talk to them, these events create a positive atmosphere and can help people feel less lonely and anxious. Seeing your neighbors also reminds you that your neighbors are just people.

WHAT'S WORKING

A resident with mental illness and her daughter got invited to dinner during a really stressful move. This small gesture gave her the support and comfort she needed in a stressful time.

02 REDEFINE LEADERSHIP

Residents and staff are caught in a system where **they don't have the ability to shape or inform the decisions that affect them.** Despite their expertise, skills and valuable perspectives, they are often in positions where they don't make the rules or get to control what their spaces look like. And they're often disconnected from the entities that make decisions on their behalf.

Residents and staff don't have context for why these decisions matter, or the resources to make their own decisions. And when we don't have agency or the trust to manage their own decisions or spaces, it's easy to slip up. And their jobs and housing depends on everyone being on the same page.

How might we support resident and staff leadership and ownership over rules, policies, processes and spaces?

02 REDEFINE LEADERSHIP

- Staff don't look forward to the recertification process because it's so invasive.
- While staff were assembling mailings for a major campaign, a staff tried to get stamps. They didn't have a company card, so they asked their boss. Their boss offered to purchase a postage machine. Three weeks later, still no postage machine, and still no stamps.
- "People come to the unit unannounced and I just want them to realize this is my home, so give me a notice. You wouldn't show up unannounced to someone's home."
 - POAH Resident
- When one site was behind on recertifications, POAH decided that training was the issue. **"We did a training on recertification but it's not the issue. We just don't have time."**
 - POAH staff

THE IMPACT

- Rules are ambiguous and often situational → stress on staff and residents
- Residents receive an overwhelming amount of rules → residents break rules
- Bureaucratic decisions and resource dissemination → slower response times for resident issues
- Onsite staff are evaluated and held responsible for a property's success based on other people's plans and ideas
- Participating in trainings that don't solve root issues

03 STRENGTHEN WORKPLACE COLLABORATION

Staff working in Community Impact and Property Management ultimately have the same goal: we want **safe, quality places for residents to live**. We might all want the same thing, but our roles, our functions within the system, and even our physical surroundings can create competing and conflicting agendas so we're not able to work together. When we work on teams with seemingly opposing views, we miss opportunities to support each other or work together to lessen our workloads. This makes work more stressful, taking away time and energy to do the work serving residents.

How might property management and resident services work together in service of the mission?

How might we create environments that encourage us to work together?

03 STRENGTHEN WORKPLACE COLLABORATION

- Community Impact's priority is to ensure residents have the resources and support they need to thrive. They have fewer rules to enforce and more flexibility in their daily tasks.
- Meanwhile, Property Management is responsible for ensuring the properties are in compliance so that POAH can maintain its standing with HUD. Pressing deadlines and policies make it impossible sometimes for staff to adapt.
- Our physical environments matter. How do our spaces contribute to our feelings of how collaborative we can be? What types of spaces accommodate the way we work with residents AND support Community Impact and Property Management coming together.
 - MASS team
- What's working: POAH staff at one property created a youth program where young people set their own mission, agendas, and came up with their own projects for their community. POAH supplied the resources and young residents led the group.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

- Seen as nurturing and patient
- Focused on residents' resources and support
- More flexibility with workload
- *Example:* CI Staff at one location attend retreats, trainings on trauma informed care

PROPERTY MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE

- Seen as tough enforcers
- Focused on following rules to reduce risk and ensure compliance
- Little flexibility over workload and rules due to outside deadlines and rules
- *Example:* During a major renovation, residents had to move out on short notice. Property management tried to extend the construction schedule so they could offer more notice, but it was out of their control.

HEALING

We can't fix problems until we get to the root. Trauma is pervasive. We have to **understand where trauma comes from, recognize that we — staff and residents — all have trauma,** and see that **trauma affects how we act.** Only then can we promote environments and practices that do more than avoid triggering us...they can help us heal. We need new ways and practices for disrupting this cycle of trauma.

04 ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR STAFF BURNOUT

Staff are constantly overworked and burned out because the housing system places unreasonable expectations on staff to serve residents while also serving funders, regulators and other stakeholders. We don't have enough funding, enough staff, and enough resources to do our jobs well.

When we are running on empty tanks, we cannot adequately serve residents, let alone show up with compassion or empathy for others. And avoiding burnout falls on us. But we need POAH to build and advocate for the resources required to do our jobs well.

How might we create organizational-level support for staff to prevent burnout?

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04 ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR STAFF BURNOUT

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

A resident got a letter that her family was causing a disturbance. The resident came into the office screaming at staff and tossing things. Staff, taking a compassionate lens, understood that the letter had triggered this behavior in the resident and that the resident was taking this out on staff. Staff tried not to react. **“I don’t know what she’s been through.”**

Later when staff relayed the experience to a manager, they felt as though the instances was ‘shrugged off.’ This minimized the staff’s feelings, even though the interaction with the resident made them feel unsafe.

Staff can’t help residents when they are traumatized. When POAH staff have a traumatic experience and they don’t have organizational support to deal with the event or its impact, they bring that stress home to their family and friends.

04 ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR STAFF BURNOUT

- The crushing responsibility of work and the inability to meet resident demands, has Community Impact and Property management + maintenance staff feeling constantly overwhelmed. **"I feel like I'm drowning."**
 - POAH staff
- Staff don't feel like they are equipped to mediate all resident conflict but they are told it's part of their job. When staff is put into positions where they don't feel like they can adequately support residents, this is stressful.
- "I was working til 8:30 last night. There aren't enough hours in the day. My phone starts ringing at 6:30 in the morning. It doesn't seem possible and I'm not really good at taking care of myself."
 - POAH Property Manager
- One property manager said she can set boundaries to leave work at home, but she worries about her supervisor, "Tina." Tina carries a company phone and gets calls on weekends and nights.
- Tina also has her own things going on. **"I don't know how she does it. It really takes a strong person, these jobs aren't for weak people."**

IMPACT OF STAFF BURNOUT ON RESIDENT

A resident put in a maintenance request for a new fridge. Staff were stretched thin so the resident didn't get her fridge for a week. All her food spoiled. Residents don't understand why requests take so long. Staff are stressed because they can't get to tasks quickly enough.

WHAT'S WORKING

Staff do have individual practices for coping with workplace trauma and stress. Some go to the gym, others take walks or connect with friends. Some find comfort in peer to peer sharing. Those who do have a supervisor who can take time to listen, reported a greater ability to leave work at home.

04 ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR STAFF BURNOUT

- Property management and maintenance staff have so much work and so little time that they aren't able to build relationships with residents to best serve them. In some instances, staff feel like they could be more effective if they could eliminate unnecessary practices or protocols.
- “There is one less resident I can help because I have to go through hoops to clear things up [like working with third parties.]”
– POAH Staff
- High turnover in maintenance and property management staff means residents don't know POAH staff and staff don't know residents.

IMPACT OF STAFF BURNOUT ON CUSTOMER SERVICE

Resident has had only a partially working stove for months with four children. She has also had a roach issue months. “It feels like I'm in jail. I'm trying to respect the process but when will things get fixed?”

– POAH resident

IMPACT OF STAFF BURNOUT ON RESIDENTS

“We know residents can't get treatment they need because there are so many properties and so many residents.”

– POAH staff

05 PRIORITIZE HEALING

Staff and residents are experiencing or have experienced trauma inside and outside of POAH. Recognizing we all experience trauma is important, but without proper support and resources to help ourselves heal from the underlying issues, we may continue to inflict harm on one another.

Investing in healing could be physical spaces for restoration or community connection, or slowing down work to build relationships and trust so we can understand what staff and residents need.

How might we give staff and residents opportunities to process and heal from their traumas?

05 PRIORITIZE HEALING

- Residents expressed frustration at not getting the same grace they give POAH staff when needing issues fixed in their apartments. **“When I get a lease violation, I’m expected to correct it right away. POAH gets to take their time though.”**
- One resident sees that residents need mental health support. She's getting her social work degree, and offered to do onsite services e.g. counseling or help with case management.
- Neutral spaces (outside on a bench instead of in the office) can help alleviate tension and stress when you need to have a hard conversation.
- In Hawthorne Community Building planning process, the design calls for a “Refresh Room” for staff - a literal room to heal during the day when staff need to step away to connect or take a moment alone.

When someone has experienced trauma or is in stress response they might not show outward behaviors - it might look like keeping to yourself or saying that you are ‘fine’ because crisis or trauma is normalized.

Understanding what residents might need will take intention — and the time to build relationships.

Vicarious trauma gets lodged in our bodies. If it gets stuck in our bodies, we tend to pour it into someone else instead of pouring it out. **How can we collectively "pour out" before we pour it onto someone else?**

– Staff, Center for Trauma Informed Innovation

06 ADDRESS COMMUNITY TRAUMA

Our trauma doesn't just stem from our housing, but what's going on outside of POAH — neighborhood violence, gentrification, the pandemic, and poverty can all be traumatic to us. And that trauma affects how we interact with each other, how we respond to issues, and even how we see POAH.

POAH may not be responsible for our trauma, but POAH is an institution that can continue the cycle of trauma... or help disrupt it.

How might we acknowledge and respond to events and experiences outside of POAH housing that can recreate trauma for staff and residents?

06 ADDRESS COMMUNITY TRAUMA

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Flat 9 residents had few complaints about Flat 9 itself, but more about their history and what happened around them. The property used to be owned by Boston Housing Authority. Residents and staff said the former property was traumatic for everyone. People were shot in the building and jumped out of windows; management only interacted with residents to enforce rules and collect rent. Residents are grateful that Flat 9 is night and day from its past, but its history still lingers with residents. Residents were wary about sharing their stories for fear of repercussions. And the property still carries the stigma from being a BHA property.

Residents also talked about the impact of the surrounding neighborhood. The neighborhood has a history of gun violence, crime, and police brutality. And residents are surrounded by construction, watching historic homes get torn down and replaced by luxury condos.

**What impact might these past events and experiences on residents?
How might this affect how residents and staff see each other?**

06 ADDRESS COMMUNITY TRAUMA

- Residents in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods said they struggle to find safe places where their kids can play, where teens can stay out of trouble, or even just a simple laundromat to do laundry.
- One resident said the old laundromat was turned into a bar. Residents notice all the money being poured into the neighborhood, but residents still have to go to another neighborhood just to do laundry.
- On the neighborhood development: **“They made it for them.”**
- Safety looks different from person to person. Some residents said more police, more security, and more cameras will make them feel safer. But other people associate police presence with brutality and violence, and associate cameras with surveillance.
- We won’t make people feel safer with a checklist. Our relationships, actions, and physical surroundings all help contribute to a safer place to live.
- Small things can feel big when you're dealing with a lot in your own life. **“I’m living through all this stuff and you can’t bring me a lightbulb?”**
 - POAH resident

Last summer, during the protests sparked by George Floyd’s murder, a POAH site proactively boarded up their first floor office windows to protect tenants’ information. Residents recalled being upset that their first floor residential units weren’t also boarded up. POAH didn’t explain why they boarded up the windows to residents or check on residents to see how the protests — or the underlying issues that caused these protests — affected them. Tenants interpreted the action as POAH caring more about the company than the residents. Staff admitted they didn’t think about how the boarded up windows might impact residents.

07 COMMUNICATE DIGNITY AND BELONGING

Housing can send certain messages to the people living here. The physical spaces, signage, and rules can tell us, “You are welcome. You belong.” or “There’s an entire waiting list that could replace you. We don’t trust you. This place is not meant for you.” Messages that don’t fully communicate our dignity or honor us as humans retraumatize us. When we look around POAH, what kinds of messages are we sending? What harmful stories might we be reinforcing?

How might our interactions, spaces, processes and rules reinforce dignity and belonging?

How might we communicate rules with kindness and compassion?

07 COMMUNICATE DIGNITY AND BELONGING

- Shared spaces often come with unspoken rules or etiquette, but they don't always apply to everyone, and they're not always commonly understood or agreed upon. Breaking these social contracts can lead to conflict, especially when you can't control other people's actions.
- The laundry room is a common source of conflict for residents where "unspoken rules" get broken, like common times to use the laundry or moving someone's laundry. We don't all have the same expectations, nor do they fit everyone.
- "If you are doing what's best for the company, you aren't doing what's best for the residents."
– POAH property management staff
- Hawthorne has one staff who speaks Spanish. Translation is not her sole job and she doesn't have enough time to do this. All documents are in English. As a result, Spanish-speaking residents with limited English said they have no idea what's going on. It also means they're less likely to take advantage of other services they may need.

UNCLEAR RULES

- Neither staff nor residents could figure out if residents were allowed to have bird feeders on the property. They figured out that the rule stated you could have a bird feeder if you had a "reasonable accommodation."
- Residents can't use grills within 10 feet of the building. But since many properties also ban loitering and don't have common outdoor areas, the rule gets lost in translation as "No grills allowed."

"All the rules makes me feel like a child"

– POAH Resident