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Justice Talking Radio Transcript

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Homeownership in America is at an all-time high. Nearly 70 percent of Americans now own their homes. But the increase in home purchasing has been mostly by upper-income families. Low and moderate-income families are finding it increasingly difficult to find affordable places to live and three and a half million people still reside in some form of government-subsidized housing. In recent years, government aid for that housing has also significantly changed. High-rise public housing projects have given way to new approaches where low-income residents are provided vouchers for the private market or live in mixed-income developments. Join us for this edition of Justice Talking as we look at the governmental policies that affect low-income housing.

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MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking. I'm Margot Adler. About three and a half million people in America live in public housing. That is housing that is either wholly or partially subsidized by the government. There has been public housing in the country for about 75 years and during that time it has been a safety net for the poor, the disabled, and the elderly. Today there are just over one million public housing units in America. On today's show we'll hear how government-subsidized housing developed in the United States, what its problems have been, and how the Department of Housing and Urban Development is working to improve the quality of public housing around the country. With new urban design, former eyesores are turning into revitalized housing complexes.

To hear one person's experience of what it's like to live in public housing, I talked with Mary Johns. She's been a resident of Chicago public housing for 18 years. She is the editor-in-chief of the Residents' Journal, a six-times-a-year publication with a circulation of 40,000, produced by and for public housing residents in Chicago. Welcome to Justice Talking.

MARY JOHNS: Thank you for having me.

MARGOT ADLER: Mary, when you moved into public housing in 1989 you had five children. You were 28 years old. What brought you there?

MARY JOHNS: I always lived in the private-market rental housing and it just so happened that the landlord of the building I was occupying sold it to another person who wanted their rent on a date different than I was paying for it. And so I was on public welfare at the time, and so I couldn't pay it. So they took me along with other people to court. By the fifth month I still couldn't find an apartment and that was in '89. With five children it was still difficult, so I ended up in public housing.

MARGOT ADLER: When you got your apartment in public housing, how big of an apartment was it for your family?

MARY JOHNS: It was four bedrooms, a kitchen, and one bathroom, and only one entrance way.

MARGOT ADLER: Now you've lived in three different public housing units in Chicago, correct?

MARY JOHNS: Yes.

MARGOT ADLER: And why did you have to move each time?

MARY JOHNS: Currently, the Chicago Housing Authority is undergoing its 1.6 billion dollar plan for transformation. You know, they're tearing down--quote--"the projects." They're intending to turn them into mixed-income community, meaning no longer we'll just solely be public housing residents living in the units. But now it'll be a third private market rate, a third for-sale units, and a third public housing.

MARGOT ADLER: You now live in a mixed-income neighborhood. Your neighbors, I gather, don't know that your housing is subsidized by the government. What's better about living there and, conversely, what do you miss from your old apartment?

MARY JOHNS: I miss the family. It's like family-oriented, the community. Even though you might not necessarily socialize with any particular person you most likely knew everybody. And you had--people were neighborly.

MARGOT ADLER: What's better about living in the neighborhood you're in now?

MARY JOHNS: Well, what I like about where I live now is currently I have better access to a lot of amenities. You know, I'm easily accessible to the public transportation route. There are a lot of retail stores in the area: food, clothing, shoes, so forth. But the apartment that I moved into is one bedroom lesser. And I didn't mind because I have two sons in the armed forces and the rest of the children are grown and out of the house. So I didn't really need the extra bedroom.

MARGOT ADLER: When you look at public housing as you've experienced it over the years, what have been the worst aspects of it?

MARY JOHNS: The failure for the Chicago Housing Authority management to continue to enforce their rules and regulations and to maintain the buildings.

MARGOT ADLER: And what's been the real benefit of public housing for you?

MARY JOHNS: The benefit: my job, first of all, because the Residents' Journal initially was the Chicago Housing Authority initiative, resident initiative.

MARGOT ADLER: Well, I looked at it on the webpage. It looked pretty good!

MARY JOHNS: Oh, thank you. Actually--I appreciate that, actually we're short staffed. Actually, as of August 2000 we took it over, and the residents, we run it now ourselves. We took off with it because, I mean, this is a lot of the people, the poor. They have skills and they have talents. A lot of them have PhDs and other doctorate degrees and stuff like that. So there's a lot of talent and skills within public housing. And you know, people fall on hard times for whatever in their life.

MARGOT ADLER: Mary Johns is a resident of Chicago Public Housing. She is the editor-in-chief of the Residents' Journal, a publication for people in public housing in Chicago. Thanks for talking with me.

MARY JOHNS: I appreciate it. And I hope you have a good year.

MARGOT ADLER: To learn more about the publication and to hear Mary's poem about what it's like to live in public housing, visit our website, justicetalking.org.

MARGOT ADLER: To find out about the original intent of public housing and how it has changed over time, I talked with Nicolas Retsinas. He is the director of Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies. Prior to that he was an assistant secretary for housing at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. I asked him when public housing was first built in America and why.

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Well, originally public housing was part of a whole series of public works projects right after the Depression when the government was trying to put people back to work. The official start of public housing in America was the National Housing Act of 1937, which authorized the construction of public housing around the country.

MARGOT ADLER: How did public housing go from an idealistic, democratic, locally-controlled living option to a dismal poverty program?

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Well, I don't know if it was a dismal poverty program. It really--as I said--it started in the late '30s, took a hiatus during World War II, and then started in earnest during the late '40s, early '50s. That was around the same time that a lot of people left the farm

to go to urban areas, particularly African-Americans from the South. It continued that way for about 10, 15 years, into the 1960s. Then the government made a very fateful decision: they decided to prioritize public housing for the very poor. So it was no longer for people who were temporarily unemployed; it was for people who were very poor and might be unemployed for a long, long time. Then it became characterized as a program for the poor and the very poor.

MARGOT ADLER: We'll be talking a lot on this show about various programs in public housing. Could you briefly describe a few terms for us?

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Sure.

MARGOT ADLER: Let's start with "Section 8." What does it mean?

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Section 8 is part of the National Housing Act. It is the section of the legislation that authorizes assistance for individuals. Originally it was assistance that was tied to particular units, but over time it really was more tenant-based, that is, tied to the family.

MARGOT ADLER: Let's take another term: "Hope 6." What is that?

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Hope 6 is a program started in the early 1990s that grew out of a concern for the terrible condition of what was called "severely distressed public housing." It authorized the demolition and replacement of that severely distressed public housing with new developments. It is often synonymous with mixed-income developments, developments that were more of scale to the neighborhood, not the high-rise public housing that often is the stereotype of public housing in America.

MARGOT ADLER: When you hear the term "subsidized housing," what does that usually mean?

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Subsidized housing refers to government assistance and usually it implies substantial government assistance. Public housing is direct building of housing and financing of housing by the federal government and local public housing authorities. Other subsidized housing may be privately owned but it might have a mortgage with a lower interest rate, or it might involve some rental assistance.

MARGOT ADLER: Another term that we hear a lot these days in regard to housing is "vouchers." Talk about that.

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Vouchers are a form of Section 8 assistance. The vouchers are essentially a certificate that a family can use to rent an apartment in the private marketplace. And the voucher allows them to pay the rent even though the rent may exceed 30 percent of their income. The difference between the rent and 30 percent of the income is the value of the voucher.

MARGOT ADLER: Talk about a few of the lawsuits that have changed things for public housing residents in recent years.

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Well, there have been many lawsuits over the last 30 years. Many of the lawsuits back to the '60s and '70s really had to do--like in Chicago--with accusations on the part of tenants, on the part of low-income advocacy groups, that the government, the federal government, often in concert with the local government, had specifically built public housing in a way that segregated the population. And the litigants would suggest that that was done intentionally. More recently there's been legislation that has tried to stop local public housing authorities from undertaking Hope 6 projects, that is, from demolishing public housing.

MARGOT ADLER: And the argument being made there is what?

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Well, two-fold: one, when Hope 6 was funded in the early 1990s, they eliminated what had before then been a provision of the law, which was if you knock down a public housing unit you must replace it on a one-for-one basis. Hope 6 relaxed that rule, and many tenants were concerned that if the existing developments, or projects, were taken down, those same numbers of units wouldn't be rebuilt. Or, secondly, they were skeptical that when the government said it was--we're here to help you, we're here to take down these developments, and yes, we'll have better developments after, they just didn't trust the government.

MARGOT ADLER: Where do you think we are right now with public housing policy?

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Public housing policy in the United States in many small communities works pretty well. It's thinly funded and public housing authorities have to make do. In many, many large cities, however, it has been an abject failure. It has symbolized the worst of government programs in government policies.

MARGOT ADLER: When you think about the future do you think that we're going to see a continued trend toward mixed income housing?

NICOLAS RETSINAS: At the local level clearly there is a preference for mixed-income housing. We may not be sure as academics whether mixed-income housing has the desired effects, but we do know for sure that concentrated poverty does not work. The problem with mixed-income housing is can you build enough low-income units within mixed-income housing to address the serious affordable housing problem that this nation has?

MARGOT ADLER: Nicolas Retsinas is the director of Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies. Prior to that he was an assistant secretary for housing at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Thank you so much for coming on Justice Talking.

NICOLAS RETSINAS: Thank you.

MARGOT ADLER: Coming up: a debate on what our country should do about public housing. One policy analyst says that cities should just phase it out.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: If we set aside--as we have for many years--large tracts of cities, freezing them and saying this will be housing for those of low income in perpetuity, we risk tying the hands of our cities and then saying: "Gee, why do we have urban problems?"

MARGOT ADLER: Should the future of public housing be no public housing at all? Stay with us.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking. I'm Margot Adler. Today more Americans own homes than ever before, but there are still three and a half million people who rely on public and subsidized housing. To talk with me about our country's policies are Barbara Sard and Howard Husock. Barbara Sard is the director of housing policy for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, an organization that examines how fiscal policy and public programs affect low- and moderate-income families. Howard Husock is vice president of programs at the Manhattan Institute, a think tank focusing on economic choice and responsibility. He is the author of "The Trillion Dollar Housing Mistake." Welcome to both of you.

BARBARA SARD: Thanks for having me.

HOWARD HUSOCK: Hi Margot. Thanks for having me.

MARGOT ADLER: Barbara, when you read about the state of government-subsidized housing today you find numerous stories about long waiting lists to get into a public housing unit, cities running out of vouchers for housing assistance. Do we have a low-income housing crisis in our country?

BARBARA SARD: We have a serious and growing problem of a lack of affordable housing for low-income people in this country. It is a problem that has spread throughout the country, although there are areas where it is more severe. Interestingly, recent data indicates that the problem is getting worse, not better, and that it is getting worse for families with somewhat more income than used to be the case, for people you might consider to be of moderate income. Although, not surprisingly, the problem continues to be the worst for the families with the lowest incomes.

MARGOT ADLER: Howard, you believe that our public housing policies are completely wrongheaded. Tell us briefly why.

HOWARD HUSOCK: The problem with our housing policy crisis that Barbara is talking about is it's really a misstatement of the problem that we face. Most Americans are extremely well housed. We are at record levels of home ownership. More than 70 percent of Americans own their own homes. The problem that Barbara's really describing is a problem of extremely low-income households, mainly single mothers and their children. In terms of the problems that I see in public housing, both in its traditional form and the new forms, it has historically had significant maintenance problems. And it's very expensive to build new housing. Very few people can benefit from it. Vouchers, we've doubled the amount of money that we spend on

housing vouchers since the late 1990s. But we're having problems of concentrations of voucher holders starting to develop in lower-income neighborhoods. And that's having neighborhood effects that we should be concerned about.

MARGOT ADLER: Barbara, there are a few approaches to deal with the issue of low-income housing. There are public housing units in the traditional sense. There are housing vouchers. Among these, what approaches do you believe have been the most effective?

BARBARA SARD: I think an effective housing policy is a balanced one. There are communities where there is a real shortage of units where giving a family a voucher is not going to be effective because there's nothing to rent. And this is particularly true in areas where the opportunities for jobs, for better schools, are likely to be greater. So it is very important to have a policy that brings down the cost of construction in some areas. There are other areas where there is sufficient supply and a voucher is a much more cost-efficient way of closing the gap between what housing rents for and what a family can afford. I just want to add: Howard mentioned that there's a growing problem of concentration of voucher holders. I'm not sure the data supports that assertion. It is stated in some newspaper articles from time to time. HUD did a report several years ago that demonstrates that certainly vouchers are more effective than any other housing policy. We have had to de-concentrate the lower-income people and give them an opportunity to live in more mixed-income communities. It is true, though, and perhaps there is some room for agreement here, that vouchers could be much more effective as a de-concentration tool.

HOWARD HUSOCK: I would just add in response to that that just for one example of concentration, if you look at New York City--which has the largest voucher program in the country, more than 90,000 voucher holders--just 11 of the city's 59 community districts contain 50 percent of all the voucher households. I think concentration is inevitable because the funds provided by vouchers are not going to allow you to move to the fancy suburbs. That's just reality.

MARGOT ADLER: Howard, conservatives love vouchers in education. What's the problem with them in housing?

HOWARD HUSOCK: The problem in housing is there is what I call collateral damage that vouchers cause to neighborhoods. It's important for poor people to have the chance to work their way up in this country. It's important that poor neighborhoods be treated in a way that they can be good neighborhoods. But if lower-income households are simply moved because of the availability of a voucher to a higher-income neighborhood--and this is where I am going to sound culturally conservative--the good life decisions that allow you to move from a low-income to a slightly better neighborhood, and all Americans are familiar with that process of scrimping and saving, that process is short-circuited when households are simply awarded the means to move to a more expensive neighborhood without making the life decisions including having two incomes in a family and other things like that that allow you to advance.

MARGOT ADLER: But in a sense you are saying that poor people should not move into richer neighborhoods.

HOWARD HUSOCK: I'm saying that poor people will move to richer neighborhoods as they advance in life. And that happens and has happened historically. If you go to the Lower East Side of New York there's something there called the Tenement House Museum, and thousands of people go every year to what they call "the urban log cabin." Well, we know that people lived there in very abject conditions and now we memorialize it as a starting point for people who made good life decisions and moved up. And that's what we have to support. There's no fundamental reason why lower-income neighborhoods have to be bad neighborhoods. We have to supply the right kinds of parks, the right kinds of schools, the right kinds of policing. We are never going to be able to disperse all the poor people into wealthier neighborhoods. That's a nonstarter. It's impractical. And so it's better for us to concentrate resources to help people advance.

MARGOT ADLER: That was Howard Husock of the Manhattan Institute. I'm also joined by Barbara Sard of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

BARBARA SARD: I think a lot of what Howard's posing is a false dichotomy. It is important for a housing policy to consider neighborhood concentration and expansion of opportunity. It is also important for a housing policy to improve neighborhoods that have fallen into disrepair, that have been subject to disinvestment. It is also important to have strategies that help people improve their education and job skills so that they can advance, so they can make their own decisions. But I think what Howard is suggesting that is pernicious is that it is bad for non-poor people to have a poor person living near them. Much of the controversy in some communities that is alleged to be caused by voucher holders moving has time after time after time been shown to really be the reaction to racial change in neighborhoods, where anyone of color is assumed-- who moves into a neighborhood that has previously been white--is assumed to be a voucher holder. So since it's--

HOWARD HUSOCK: Well, I just--

BARBARA SARD: --no longer polite to talk about, to be explicitly racist, people blame the voucher program.

HOWARD HUSOCK: Well, let me just say for my part I completely reject the idea that I am somehow trafficking in code words for race, because the immediate experiences that I've had in my own research, if you go to the south suburbs of Chicago, most notably, which are predominantly African-American, you will find some of the staunchest concern about concentrations of voucher holders. My heart goes out to those people who have worked hard, played by the rules, and are concerned about what happens when those who may have not done so are being located nearby them. And that is not a race issue. It's a behavior issue. And I think we ought to make that very clear.

MARGOT ADLER: Howard, what would you propose instead of having the federal government subsidize housing for the poor?

HOWARD HUSOCK: To me this is an income problem, not a housing problem. The fastest growing income support program we have in the country that I support, and many conservatives support, is the earned income tax credit. It outstrips public assistance and the Section 8 voucher program combined today. Supplementing the incomes of the poor rather than providing them with a specific good, whether it's housing or anything else, is a far more effective way to go. And we can tie it to work, which is a preferable policy.

MARGOT ADLER: What do you think about that, Barbara?

BARBARA SARD: It is true that most of today's most serious housing problems are related to the lack of income. So it also ought to be true that supplementing income would largely solve those problems. So here Howard and I are actually agreeing. I think there's still an important role for some production but let's put that aside for the moment. The question I think is could you get support for an increase in the earned income tax credit amount and who served that would be sufficient to really make a dent in the gap between people's incomes and their housing costs. We need an increase that is a lot more than just say \$1,000 a year or less than \$100 a month to close the gap between what people can afford and what rents are typically in the private market today.

MARGOT ADLER: I'd like both of you to weigh in on another issue and that is Hope 6. In 1992 Hope 6 was a housing program of the Clinton administration. First of all, what did it do and why was this such a radical change in public housing? Might as well start with you, Howard.

HOWARD HUSOCK: Hope 6 was a demolition and reconstruction program in which what was being called the most severely distressed--and that was a technical term--public housing in the country was demolished, and some of the most infamous public housing projects, such as the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, were indeed torn down and replaced by architecturally innovative, I suppose, or at least adventurous, mixed-income combination homeownership, rental, and public housing with a range of incomes. So it's the latest, if I might say, utopian scheme. It was zeroed out in the, uh, during the Bush administration.

MARGOT ADLER: So Barbara, there's no more funding for it and so what is its future?

BARBARA SARD: The Bush administration has attempted to zero it out. Actually, Congress has refused to let the program die. It's kind of been on life support with about 20 percent of the funding that it had received annually during the Clinton administration. I think this is one of those issues on which we're going to see a big change with the change in Congress. I'm cautiously optimistic that in resurrecting Hope 6 it will not just be the same old program but will have some important changes.

MARGOT ADLER: Barbara Sard is the director of housing policy at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Howard Husock is a fellow at the Manhattan Institute. Thank you both for being on Justice Talking.

HOWARD HUSOCK: Thank you.

BARBARA SARD: Thank you.

MARGOT ADLER: Renting a place to live is becoming increasingly more expensive. Danilo Pelletiere is the research director of the National Low Income Housing Coalition. The organization has looked at how much it costs to rent an apartment in different places around the country. I asked him to give a picture of what it's like for renters.

DANILO PELLETTIERE: It is becoming more expensive to rent despite the sort of focus lately that's been on homeownership and the rise of homeownership costs. Renters have experienced their own increases in most markets across the country. And so today the statistic we use is the housing wage, which is the wage that you would need to earn per hour in order to afford a modest two bedroom apartment at the fair market rent. And the housing wage nationwide is \$16.31.

MARGOT ADLER: Which is a lot more than the minimum wage.

DANILO PELLETTIERE: It's a lot more than the minimum wage and it's a lot more than most people make.

MARGOT ADLER: And what's the most expensive rental market in the country?

DANILO PELLETTIERE: According to our statistics, Stamford-Norwalk, Connecticut.

MARGOT ADLER: And how much does someone have to earn to rent a place in that community?

DANILO PELLETTIERE: \$30.62 an hour.

MARGOT ADLER: Wow. And what's the least expensive rental market in the country?

DANILO PELLETTIERE: The least expensive rental markets are rural markets.

MARGOT ADLER: And in general it would be places like West Virginia, Kentucky...?

DANILO PELLETTIERE: Exactly.

MARGOT ADLER: So in that Kentucky community, for example, how much would someone have to earn to rent there?

DANILO PELLETTIERE: Well that would be probably around \$8.00 an hour.

MARGOT ADLER: Now, as you look at the rental markets across the country, how have these markets changed in recent years?

DANILO PELLETTIERE: The thing that we've seen is that there have been substantial increases in rent even as people have been moving to homeownership and homeownership rates have been growing. And a large reason for that seems to be that we're losing a lot of affordable rental units. At the same time people have been moving to areas of the country and areas within their communities where there historically hasn't been a lot of rental housing, so the west, and the suburbs. And so when they get to those communities that's where the jobs are, that's where things are happening, they find that the rental costs are quite a bit higher.

MARGOT ADLER: And what result has this meant for the working poor?

DANILO PELLETTIERE: That there really are fewer options for their housing and that means that either they have to spend a lot more or they have to double up or crowd units. And this we often see in the suburbs where there isn't rental housing. You see, you know, five, six, seven or more cars in a driveway. You also have--almost as an outcome of this you have the number of working homeless.

MARGOT ADLER: When I was growing up in New York City everybody rented that I knew. Everybody rented apartments; poor people, rich people, everyone. Now, perhaps that's just a New York thing but my sense is that nationally it's now assumed that owning is the only way to go. Is there a stigma against someone who is a renter these days?

DANILO PELLETTIERE: I think it's always been there in American society that owning is part of, you know, the American dream, and I think that while it can be overstated, a certain part of it, I think that it's really reached just incredible proportions lately in terms of the stigma attached to renting and to rental units, and that renters are problems. In survey research that we've done--in looking at other people's surveys, what's interesting is that one of the things when you ask them what they want in their neighborhood, one of the things that they will say is that they don't want rental housing. But what it really shows is that rental housing has this stigma attached to it. And it really shouldn't. The type of housing that you choose at certain times in your life, at certain, you know, when certain situations or conditions apply, policy has limited options for people at the same time that our politicians and others have made a very big push for homeownership, so that people who aren't in homeownership probably more than ever feel like they're losers.

MARGOT ADLER: Danilo Pelletiere is the research director of the National Low Income Housing Coalition. Thank you so much for coming on Justice Talking.

DANILO PELLETTIERE: No problem.

MARGOT ADLER: Coming up, we'll hear how architectural design can change public opinion about housing for the poor.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The general public still has the image of the old public housing projects. We have to overcome that and design plays a very big role politically in changing people's minds.

MARGOT ADLER: How public housing design can create community. Stay with us.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking. I'm Margot Adler. The Department of Housing and Urban Development is the federal agency that oversees all public housing in the country. At a local level public housing authorities manage individual buildings and give out housing vouchers for people to use in the private market.

With me to talk about the reputation of public housing and the reality is Orlando Cabrera. He is the assistant secretary for public and Indian housing at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Before that he was executive director of the Florida Housing Finance Corporation. I asked him why there are only housing vouchers for a fraction of the people who want them and whether vouchers are a bad idea.

ORLANDO CABRERA: No, I think vouchers are a terrific idea. I don't think it's a fraction of folks. Vouchers go to a lot of people. There are about 3 million vouchers issued nationwide. So at the end of the day it's actually the largest part of the PIH program in terms of funding and in terms of service.

MARGOT ADLER: More broadly, how has funding for public housing changed in the past few years?

ORLANDO CABRERA: Funding for public housing is currently about \$3.6 billion on the operating side. In the '06 budget they received another approximately \$2.2 billion. So the full pool is approximately \$5.8 billion. There's a major change happening in public housing right now. And that change is taking public housing from where it began, which is largely a regulatory rubric and moving it toward a financial rubric. And that's important because most public housing authorities have very old units, generally ranging between 50 and 70 years. They're very expensive to run. They have to be replaced. Most public housing authorities are really management entities. They're not development entities. So they have a lot of experience managing units but now they need to develop them. So we're trying to move them to a place that's more financial in nature and gives them the tools to deal with those assets as well as they can to better serve the tenants that they have.

MARGOT ADLER: I know that in many cities public housing has been mismanaged and there have been funding problems. And as a result the tenants have suffered. What's HUD doing to improve that?

ORLANDO CABRERA: One of the things we recently created was the Office of Receivership Oversight. It essentially is charged with assuring that we pay particular attention to what I have come to call "problem children."

MARGOT ADLER: By problem children you mean particular housing units or project?

ORLANDO CABRERA: Well actually both. It means public housing authorities that have a real institutional issue in terms of operating. And increasingly as we move toward asset management it's going to be also dealing with particular assets that have to be dealt with. So by way of example, currently it only means a housing authority that is troubled and has to have been put in receivership or something very, very close to it because it is not healthy. And the purpose of that office is make sure that day to day, every day, we're moving towards a position where that institution is more viable for the benefit of the tenants in those public housing units, and for the benefit of voucher holders.

MARGOT ADLER: Give me an example of one of the most successful public housing developments in the U.S. right now.

ORLANDO CABRERA: I would say--I've got several examples.

MARGOT ADLER: Alright.

ORLANDO CABRERA: I would say that King County, Washington does an outstanding job. Seattle does an outstanding job. Tacoma does an outstanding job of managing its public housing and developing housing generally, affordable housing, generally for the people they are supposed to serve.

MARGOT ADLER: And what do these look like as opposed to--

ORLANDO CABRERA: I don't want to forget somebody, I'm sorry. Atlanta does an outstanding job. Chicago has done an outstanding job. And what do they look like?

MARGOT ADLER: Yeah, I mean, what makes them successful?

ORLANDO CABRERA: I think what makes them successful is a willingness to take a risk understanding the tools that they have available to them, and a commitment, locally, to make sure that they serve the populations that they want to serve.

MARGOT ADLER: And where is your own vision about public housing? Where do you see it going, let's say, in the next 10 years, twenty years?

ORLANDO CABRERA: The good vision would be that public housing authorities become far more multi-faceted than they currently are. You know, currently or historically what they have been are property managers, and that's good. And they do that really well. I think it's going to become very much more important for them to become important players on the development side as well. We have a lot of very old units where a lot of subsidy is being used to maintain those units. And if they had the tools, and felt comfortable using the tools to redevelop units using any number of different subsidies, as long as they provide the same service to the same demographic, I would want them to do that. Because in twenty years, in ten years, that asset is

going to be 80 years old. And it's going to serve folks even less well than it does today. I would like to create a situation where they feel much more comfortable taking a chance in developing units that better address their needs as a community.

MARGOT ADLER: Orlando Cabrera is the assistant secretary for public and Indian housing at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Thank you so much for being on Justice Talking.

ORLANDO CABRERA: Thank you.

MARGOT ADLER: For many public housing residents, owning a home may seem like an impossible dream. Reporter Brad Linder visited one woman in Philadelphia who was formerly homeless. Now thanks to financial help from a local nonprofit agency, she is looking forward to moving with her three teenaged children into their first real home.

BRAD LINDER: A home is something special to Lynn Collins. That's because she hasn't always had one. Ten years ago Collins had a stable job at a bank and a live-in boyfriend. When she became pregnant she decided to become a stay-at-home mom. But several years later the mother of three lost her boyfriend, then her children, and then her apartment. For two years Collins was homeless. She didn't have a job and she turned to drugs, unsure of how to get her life back on track.

LYNN COLLINS: When I woke up one day, well I didn't wake up, I came to, there were some children who were in a park and they were getting ready to have a picnic. And they started shaking me and waking me up. I didn't know how I had gotten there. I didn't know where I was. And I think at that point I knew that I had to do something different.

BRAD LINDER: Collins enrolled in a faith-based recovery program, got a job working at a call center, then another working at Project Home, a homeless support services organization in Philadelphia. She was able to get back custody of her son and two daughters who had been living with relatives, and they moved into a new apartment.

LYNN COLLINS: Well, I remember kissing the carpet [laughs], which might seem like a crazy thought to somebody else, but after living on the street and sleeping on the ground, you can find a whole new appreciation for a small thing like being able to turn the key in a door and knowing that at least for a certain period of time that it has your name on it.

BRAD LINDER: This could have been where the story ends. Collins doesn't make enough money to save much. She dreamt of owning her own home and paying a mortgage instead of a rent but there's no way she could afford a market-rate house without assistance. Project Home, the organization Collins works for, is redeveloping fifteen houses in north Philadelphia, a low-income part of the city with a high crime rate. The Collins family will be one of the first to move into a house here. Damian Camille is working on the construction crew. He also happens to live down the street from the abandoned houses he's working on.

DAMIAN CAMILLE: These two, probably eight and 10. The three in the middle, at least 32 years abandoned. They were abandoned before I was born and when I came up as a little kid they were always abandoned.

BRAD LINDER: Camille sees housing construction as a way to revitalize the community even if the houses being built are selling far below market rates.

DAMIAN CAMILLE: It had dilapidated between the normal atmosphere of drugs that come into the communities in the urban area, crime coming up. So the actual major transition of coming in here and developing is showing there is economical opportunity for everybody down here. More investors, more people, you know, the whole area changes.

BRAD LINDER: Each of the renovated homes will have three to four bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. And they're designed with energy efficiency in mind to keep utility bills low. They're the sort of homes that Collins and many other Philadelphians would never dream of owning if they weren't heavily subsidized by a combination of government and private dollars.

Kevin Hanna is head of the city's housing agency, which acquires abandoned buildings and helps fund affordable housing development. He says the concept of affordable housing is based on the assumption that no one should have to spend more than 40 percent of their income on housing. Hanna says there are tens of thousands of Philadelphians who could benefit from affordable housing development while only about 500 to 1,000 affordable units are built each year.

KEVIN HANNA: Housing in Philadelphia is probably more affordable than most any other large city anywhere along the Eastern Seaboard from Boston to Baltimore. That's great. The problem is the income of a lot of Philadelphians is well below the average income of people who live and work between Boston and Baltimore. So even though housing prices are lower, it makes it just as--maybe even more--difficult for a low-income family to afford a house here even though housing prices are lower here.

BRAD LINDER: The median annual household income in Philadelphia is \$30,000 and about 20 percent of the city's 1.5 million residents live below the poverty line. The house Lynn Collins will be moving into is heavily subsidized. It'll cost \$250,000 to renovate but she'll be able to buy it for \$70,000. As a first time homeowner, Collins says she also has to learn how to take care of her property.

LYNN COLLINS: There are classes where you learn about what it means to have a credit report, why a credit report is so important, what you need to do to maintain a home because it's not enough to just have one. It's just like a car. You can get a beautiful car. If you can't maintain it, what difference does it make? You have to learn about the maintenance and the upkeep. And, you know, not take it for granted.

BRAD LINDER: Collins and her three children move into their new home this summer. For Justice Talking, I'm Brad Linder.

MARGOT ADLER: To see photos of the houses that are being rehabilitated and sold to the formerly homeless in Philadelphia, visit our website, justicetalking.org.

MARGOT ADLER: Local nonprofit organizations have been instrumental in helping to create housing for the poor. My next guest is an architect who works with nonprofits who develop subsidized housing. Michael Pyatok is a fellow with the American Institute of Architects and principal of Pyatok Architects in Oakland, California. He joins us from Tempe, Arizona. Welcome, Mike.

MICHAEL PYATOK: Glad to be here.

MARGOT ADLER: When I think of public housing, usually what comes to mind are large-scale block housing projects with hundreds of tenants in crammed apartments. But that's not the kind of housing you design. I've been on your website and I was struck by how different the buildings and houses are. And how much they don't look like typical public housing. What's your philosophy about public housing design?

MICHAEL PYATOK: The housing that we produce, while it's using public money, it's being produced by and for nonprofit corporations. In those the development corporations that in many respects are like private developers. It's just as savvy about real estate development except that they don't walk away with profits. Generally speaking, the nonprofits are of a much smaller scale. Public housing authorities, if you take Oakland for example, they have about 16,000 units under their belt, in their portfolio, or the city of New York has over 100,000. So their ability to manage is much better than those that have tens of thousands of units. So they can give a lot of tender loving care to their developments, not only maintaining the properties, but insuring that the residents have lots of social services. They'll supply childcare. They'll supply family counseling services, English as a second language. So they're giving lots of other social supports than just the roof over people's heads. The general public still has the image of the old public housing projects. We have to overcome that and design plays a very big role politically in changing people's minds.

MARGOT ADLER: What design features do you include for a family that may be multi-generational or perhaps is not native to the United States?

MICHAEL PYATOK: You know, we recognize that these families will have several generations or various kinds of relatives living in with them at any one time in order to even make the rent, much less a mortgage payment. So we might put a bedroom on the ground floor with its own bathroom right off the front door so that a person can come and go from that almost as its own independent suite. And that recognizes that, yeah there might be grandparents. There might be working sons and daughters. Or there might be people even totally unrelated to the family and the family is renting those rooms out to get some additional sources of income. And then we also recognize that many of these families are blue-collar families and they're constantly looking for other sources of income and using the home as a workplace is essential. And that workplace

is not working in front of a computer screen. It might be making clothing. It might be repairing appliances. It might even be repairing cars. It's what our zoning laws might say is "light manufacturing." And we'll set up the house so that rooms downstairs, in conjunction with an adjacent garage or carport, can be commandeered into that family-based business so that additional sources of income can be earned by that family. So, you know, building in those kinds of opportunities are really critical and oftentimes the zoning codes and the building codes don't permit it. So quite frankly, and I realize that this is going to be on the radio, but there are ways of getting around the system in the way you design these things so that people can easily press them into these alternative uses at some future date. And as we in many of our cities--as you walk through the back alleys there are all kinds of businesses, and all kinds of second and third units operating out of people's houses that aren't officially on the books. And, you know, let's face it, for the bottom quarter you got to do what you got to do. And so we try to make it easier through our designs.

MARGOT ADLER: When one of your public housing buildings goes up, what's the neighborhood reaction? Do they know it's public housing?

MICHAEL PYATOK: Well, it's not public housing. It's private housing assisted by public funds.

MARGOT ADLER: But there still might be a stigma for somebody getting public assistance in some sense over housing.

MICHAEL PYATOK: Yeah, you're right. I mean there are many neighborhoods that resist the introduction of such housing and such people into their communities. But I'm a firm believer in making certain that everybody in the neighborhood gets involved in the process before anything is designed. A lot of those folks are reacting out of ignorance. First of all they think it's public housing. They think it's like the stuff that was built in the '50s. So they have to be educated out of that. And they don't realize that 99 percent of the people that are going to be occupying those houses are hardworking people. In fact, they're probably harder-working than they are in that some of those households, or many of them, will have three or four incomes coming in to make things, you know, pencil out. So if you engage the neighbors in the process of designing, as they engage in that process it demystifies everything. They learn that a) it's not a government housing project, b) the management company is going to be very rigorous and is in fact inviting neighbors to sit on the board of the management company of that development. And then they also learn that it's physically possible to design a handsome development that might be even twice the density of their neighborhood if it's done right. And when they get to do it, it changes their attitudes. So a lot of those folks are really well intentioned, and labeling them as NIMBYs and as evil, selfish people I think is a fundamental error. They are all good folks. They're just responding in self-interest on a limited base of knowledge.

MARGOT ADLER: Mike Pyatok is a fellow with the American Institute of Architects and director of the Stardust Center for Affordable Homes and the Family at Arizona State University. Thanks for talking with me.

MICHAEL PYATOK: You're quite welcome.

MARGOT ADLER: That brings us to the end of our show. Give us your thoughts about public housing on our website, justicetalking.org. There you can check out our new blog where many of the nation's leading commentators give their views on law and American life. Thanks for joining me. I hope you'll tune in next week. I'm Margot Adler.
