

VOICE Alexandria's Victory with Displaced Public Housing Tenants

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Over the last year VOICE Alexandria has pushed determinedly with James Bland public housing residents that are being relocated during the redevelopment of the property. James Bland is a public housing complex comprised of 192 two-story town houses and is in the heart of old-town Alexandria, minutes from the Braddock Metro station. The complex is managed by the Alexandria Redevelopment & Housing Authority (ARHA) with city and federal funding. Over the next 5 years, the property will undergo a phased redevelopment into a mixed-use complex with condos and public housing apartments.



Between November '09 and January '10 the first phase of the relocation included 32 families and an additional 20 families that were "transferred" to smaller units. Despite VOICE's action with the tenants, most residents were rushed out during the holidays and had no choice in where they would be relocated to; only an ultimatum. The housing authority classified some tenants as "transfers" because they needed to be relocated to smaller units (ex - from a 2 bedroom to a 1 bedroom). Although these moves were initiated by the housing authority, the housing authority decided that their policies did not require them to move "transfers" under the same rules as other tenants. "Transferred" tenants were given as little as 72 hours to get their new keys, move their things and return the keys from the old unit under threat of eviction, were not given relocation payments, and were charged fees if they left furniture (that may have been too cumbersome to move in 72 hours) on the property.

After a year-long public fight, VOICE Alexandria is celebrating a victory. The Alexandria redevelopment & Housing Authority (ARHA) has agreed to most of our demands including making relocation payments of \$500 for each family that didn't receive them last year and committing to 5 demands on how they will treat the 150 families that still have to move.

VOICE's Actions to Remedy the Relocation Problems at James Bland

- Community walks and listening sessions with tenants to craft demands (August – November 2009)
- Had initial meetings with ARHA to raise our concerns (August – December 2009)
- Political Meetings with the Mayor and City Council (December 2009 – April 2010)
- Walk-outs at unsuccessful action with Mayor, City Council & ARHA Board members and unsuccessful negotiation with ARHA Board (early April 2010)
- Re-worked our Power Analysis (April 2010)
- Research Actions with VA Housing & Development Authority (VHDA) Board Members and VA Delegate, Letter to US Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD) (April – June 2010)
- Action at VHDA Board meeting in Richmond (June 7th 2010)
- Successful Negotiation with ARHA, VHDA & City (July 22nd 2010)
- Celebratory Action – September 25th 2010

VOICE Demands of ARHA and Results

For James Bland residents that were transferred into smaller units last winter

- Reimbursements for transferred residents at Old Dominion Blvd - ARHA will reimburse transferred residents \$500 per family or up to \$750 per family if they have receipts, in total up to \$25,000
- Extra move fees for transferred at Old Dominion Blvd. Fees are labeled as "Balance forward" - ARHA has rescinded the fees from 3 tenants' bills. ARHA maintains that the remaining charges represent damages done to the property sometime during the term of their tenancy. ARHA will notify VOICE of the final amount rescinded from the 3 tenants' bills
- Return resident with Alzheimer's disease that was relocated out of the neighborhood against the doctor's recommendation back into a later phase of James Bland at no cost to her or her family - ARHA has agreed to relocate Mrs. Crump but still has not committed to a deadline

For residents in phases 2 – 5 of the relocation

ARHA has agreed to the following points and included them in their new relocation plan. They will be distributed to tenants on Oct 6th 2010.

- Each resident receives, in writing, an address and specific date at least 30 days before they are expected to move. In that time, they may visit the unit and appeal if it does not fit the needs of their family.
- Each resident gets options for units they can move into that will fit their family's needs:
 - Families with children get options in their current school zone. If a parent is okay with moving to another school zone, ARHA negotiates with ACPS an arrangement that students are allowed to stay at their current school and are provided with transportation.
- Upon moving into a new unit, ARHA inspects the unit with the residents and puts in work order for any maintenance or other concerns about the unit. All repairs are made within 30 days.
- Allow residents who chose to accept housing choice voucher to relocate to public housing if they are unable to secure housing with their voucher
- First right of refusal for Bland residents to get back into the newly developed property



Some of the tenants that were "transferred" from James Bland in the Fall of 2009 worked with VOICE to demand their relocation payments. The payments were won almost a year later in September 2010. (L-R: Vernell Townes, Mary Simms, Luther, Mia Jones, Cheryl Reynolds, Charlene Walker)

**Rev. Ann Herlin, Associate Pastor of Old Presbyterian Meeting House & VOICE leader
Remarks for City Council Hearing – September 25, 2010**

Good morning. I'm the Rev. Ann Herlin, a pastor at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Old Town. Our congregation is one of several Alexandria congregations involved in VOICE -- Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement. This is a group committed to organizing within our faith communities and within this broader community to work toward all people being treated with justice and respect.

For the past year, as you know, we have been working with residents of the Bland neighborhood as they have gone through the first phase of relocations for its planned redevelopment. We joined with the residents to bring their concerns to the ARHA staff and board and to city officials.

We have met individually with many of you on city council, testified before you in February, and you probably remember the last time we were here -- in April -- when over 100 Bland residents and community members attended the joint Council - ARHA Board work session, where we had hoped to hear the concerns and issues we'd been raising for months be resolved. At that meeting, frankly, it felt like we were hearing more of the same (lots of talk and no action), and since we weren't permitted to speak and no progress was being made, we walked out.

This morning we are back to report on our progress. Following that work session, we had an *unsuccessful* meeting with the ARHA Board. But we are persistent! We raised our concerns with the Virginia Housing and Development Authority, and asked them to convene a meeting with VOICE, ARHA, and city housing officials. At that meeting, on July 22nd, VOICE and ARHA were able to reach agreement on all but one issue. The very next week, the ARHA Board took action on that remaining issue. So, we are delighted today to report that ARHA has agreed to all of our demands.

In sum:

- The Board changed its policy so that all residents forced to move during Phase I are eligible to have their moving expenses reimbursed. Several residents have now received their checks.
- ARHA has removed all bulk trash removal fees charged to first phase residents who had moved on as little as three days notice.
- Arrangements have been made for an elderly resident with Alzheimer's to return for as long as possible to this neighborhood she knows as home.
- Finally, ARHA has made specific commitments to VOICE and residents for future phases of relocation, (found on your handout), including adequate notification, options for relocation, and the right to return to the redeveloped property, unless they elect otherwise in writing.

As we celebrate this resolution, two residents are here to testify about their experience pressing these demands over the last year, and Rev. Kay will finish by recognizing those who helped make this agreement possible.

Barbara Crowder, ARHA Tenant and VOICE leader
Remarks for City Council Hearing – September 25, 2010

Good morning, I'm Barbara Crowder. I have lived in the James Bland Public Housing Development for 7 years with my 20 year old daughter and 18-month old granddaughter.

I got involved with VOICE about two years ago when we were working on utility bill issues. I live in phase 3 of James Bland. I wasn't scheduled to move until 2011 but I stood with the tenants that were moved last winter because I knew soon it would be my turn and I would want someone to stand with me if I had problems.

Through this push and my two years of engagement with VOICE I learned a lot about community leadership.

The first thing I've learned is about the importance of tension. There were many tense moments as we worked diligently to hold our public officials accountable and get resolution to our problems. In the words of Fredrick Douglas, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will". In this campaign I stood up for myself and my fellow tenants. We've tried to be respectful, but stern around our demands. Looking back, I think the tension that I've inserted has been productive and needed for change to come about. Change is usually uncomfortable and creates friction. But it's necessary.

I've also learned the need to be persistent. It's taken a long year to resolve these issues. At times I wasn't sure if we would prevail, but I've learned something about my own strength and the strength of my fellow VOICE leaders by sticking it out.

Mostly from this work, I've learned that there are amazing, caring just people all around me. I truly value the relationships I've built.

I am now in the process of preparing for my own move out of James Bland. I'll be utilizing a housing choice voucher to move to Woodbridge. So far my move is going well. I'm packing and looking at potential housing in Woodbridge daily. When I get to Woodbridge, I've already committed to figuring out how I can be a leader in my community there. I wish the best of luck to my fellow tenants. I encourage the progress that ARHA is making. And I'll see you VOICE leaders at the next action.

**Charlene Walker, ARHA Tenant and VOICE leader
Remarks for City Council Hearing – September 25, 2010**

I'm Charlene Walker. I've lived in Alexandria for 30 years and now live in public housing of Old Dominion Blvd.

I am one of the tenants that was transferred from Bland to Old Dominion Blvd last winter. To be frank, last winter the move was extremely trying for me and my family. I felt like I was rushed out of my home and given an ultimatum on where I would end up. I spent Thanksgiving of 2009 surrounded by boxes. The most frustrating part was that all my neighbors at Bland got relocation payments to help cover the expenses and I didn't. I strongly felt that it was unfair that ARHA's policies didn't reimburse transfers and only required that they get 3 days notice of the move.

But I didn't just pout; I used my anger about the situation as fuel to do something about it. I talked with other tenants about how I felt and asked them to act with me. With the other VOICE clergy, lay and tenant leaders, I traveled to meetings all over the city of Alexandria, DC, out to Oakton and even down to Richmond VA to tell my testimony and ask my public officials to act. After a long year of pressing, I'm proud that our team was able to get a resolution.

I've been living on Old Dominion Blvd for almost a year now. It's been an adjustment for me and my family, but I'm doing just fine. I got my long overdue reimbursement of \$500 on September 1st, 10 months after I moved. It's late but it goes a long way in creating closure for me and my family on last year's move. I want to recognize Mr. Priest and the ARHA Board for passing resolution 484 which granted relocation payments to my family and the other tenants that were transferred from James Bland due to the relocation. There are still many challenges between tenants and ARHA staff, but this helps establish a relationship where we can raise our concerns and expect ARHA to act to resolve them. I've learned that by organizing I can make effective change.

VOICE

VIRGINIANS ORGANIZED FOR INTERFAITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

www.voice-iaf.org

V.O.I.C.E., founded in 2008, is a broad-based multi-racial, multi-faith, multi-issue, multi-county, strictly non-partisan citizens' power organization dedicated to making change on social justice issues (immigration, affordable housing, healthcare, etc) affecting the lives of low- and middle income residents in 4 Northern Virginia jurisdictions: Prince William, Fairfax, and Arlington counties as well as the City of Alexandria. VOICE is affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)—the oldest and largest citizens' organizing network in the United States. For more information on the IAF, visit www.industrialareasfoundation.org. VOICE's 47 member institutions represent 125,000+ persons:

Alexandria

Beth El Hebrew
Ebenezer Baptist
Grace Episcopal
Shiloh Baptist
St. Joseph's RC
Old Presbyterian
Trinity UMC

Arlington

Arlington Presbyterian
Lomax AME Zion
Macedonia Baptist
NOVA Catholic Community
Our Lady Queen of Peace RC
Rock Spring UCC*
St. Charles RC
St. Mary's Episcopal
Unitarian Universalist

Fairfax

Bethlehem Baptist
Burke Presbyterian*
Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center
Fairfax Presbyterian
First Christian
Good Shepherd RC
Heritage Presbyterian
Nativity RC
Rising Hope UMC
St. Anthony's RC
St. John Neuman RC
St. Mark's RC*
St. Stephen's UMC
St. Thomas a Becket RC
Temple Rodef Shalom
Voice of Mt. Vernon
Accotink Unitarian Universalist
Unitarian Universalist of Fairfax
Unitarian Universalist of Reston

Prince William

All Saints RC
Bull Run Unitarian
Ebenezer Baptist
First Baptist Manassas
First Mt. Zion Baptist
Mt. Olive Baptist
Sacred Heart RC
St. Francis RC
St. Paul UMC
St. Thomas UMC-Haymarket*
Little Union Baptist*
Word Alive International*

**Exploratory*

VOICE 2010-2011 Organizing Priorities:

Increase Access to Dental Care for Low-Income Adults: a) press VA to secure \$5 million in Emergency TANF Funding from Federal Stimulus, b) organize state & local officials to put bi-partisan pressure on NOVA's Federal delegation to extend the TANF Emergency Fund to 2012; c) secure \$125,000 from Prince William County's FY 2011 budget for low-income dental.

Address Affordable Housing & Homelessness: a) undertake jurisdictional actions around specific opportunities to preserve and develop affordable housing (e.g. North Hill, Columbia Pike); b) continue to research available public land and incentives for future development of affordable housing; c) analyze and develop foreclosure strategy for Prince William County.

Organize for Immigration Justice Locally & Nationally: a) secure meetings with Secretary Napolitano and USCIS Director Alejandro Mayorkas on Immigration Processing Backlog; b) continue Listening Sessions in at least 10 V.O.I.C.E. institutions to develop priorities and seek meetings with VA Congressional Delegation in order to position V.O.I.C.E. to weigh in on comprehensive immigration reform.

Local Action: Engage in local action to build core teams, develop leaders, secure local wins that build loyalty to VOICE, & provide opportunities for prospective member institutions to see VOICE in action. Priority opportunities include: a) Arlington Columbia Pike; b) Georgetown South—Manassas; c) Homeless in woods in Dale City/Woodbridge; Fairfax/South Rt. 1 Minority Student Achievement & Affordable Housing.

Recruit 10 new Institutions to Build VOICE's Power: Target the following areas/constituencies—A) Fairfax County: Springfield, Annandale, Herndon, Centerville; B) Prince William County: African-American/Immigrant institutions; C) Alexandria: African-American/Immigrant Institutions.

January—June 2010 Summary Accomplishments

Dental:

- Organized 300+ leader action in Richmond with 18 Virginia Senate and House leaders including 3 from the budget conference that helped preserve \$9 million+ for the VA dental safety net in the FY 2011 budget, insuring that thousands of low-income children and adults in the Commonwealth will have access to critical dental care services.
- Organized with Virginia Senate and House leaders and pressed the Commonwealth of Virginia to secure \$79 million in TANF Emergency Funds available through the Federal Recovery program, including \$5 million for the Virginia Health Care Foundation to provide emergency dental care to 7,000 low-income Virginia adults who lack it. The Federal government approved the VA Health Care Foundation Emergency Dental Pilot on June 16th.
- Secured \$100,000 in renewal funding in FY 2011 budgets from Arlington and Fairfax counties as well as Alexandria City to continue the provision of dental services to 2,000 low-income adults through the Northern Virginia Dental Clinic.
- Organized 150 person public action in Prince William County at a key FY 2011 County Board of Supervisors budget hearing that led to the County Board restoring the proposed 15% cuts to non-profit health and human services providers and the allocation of \$20,000 in new funding for the Prince William Free Health Clinic to provide expanded health services to low-income adults.

Immigration:

- Secured commitment from Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Assistant Secretary Esther Olavarria to address 200 backlogged immigration applications from VOICE members at Dar Al Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church. Ms. Olavarria promised a full accounting on 200 backlog cases and a meeting for VOICE leaders with new US Customs Immigration Services Director USCIS Director Alejandro N. Mayorkas in August 2010.
- Began organizing VOICE members and other allies to press for just and realistic comprehensive immigration reform. Started by building relationships in VOICE institutions with leaders across the divides of culture, religion, ethnicity, race, etc that can so easily polarize the immigration issue. Held 25+ listening sessions between non-citizen immigrants and American citizens at 10 VOICE congregations to build solidarity for comprehensive immigration reform.
- Turned out 1,150 leaders from 14 VOICE congregations to March for America (March 21st)—the national comprehensive immigration reform rally. Held solidarity action on April 25 for 4 undocumented immigrant youth walking from Florida to DC to bring attention to the plight of undocumented students and to demand President Obama issue an executive order to halt the deportation of Dream Act eligible students. 125 leaders from 12 VOICE congregations attended.

Affordable Housing:

- Identified all foreclosures over recent years in Prince William County, Manassas City and Manassas Park which had the highest foreclosure rate in VA. Working with The Reinvestment Fund from Philadelphia, VOICE linked these foreclosures back to the originating lenders and analyzed the data to identify lenders whose loans failed at the highest rates (e.g., between 2004 and 2008, one lender in Prince William County had a "failure rate" of 16.8%.
- Held 125+ person action to challenge Alexandria Housing and Redevelopment Board of Commissioners and Alexandria City Council to meet VOICE and tenant demands on relocation and redevelopment issues that shortchanged residents financially and treated them with disrespect. Took 5 leaders to Richmond, VA for testimony at Virginia Housing and Development Authority Board Meeting that lead to investigation of ARHA relocation policies & actions.

Local Action:

- Organized 50 residents in Georgetown South, a 850 townhome community hit hard by the foreclosure crisis, and secured agreement with Manassas City Police Chief to (1) have officers walk beats in Georgetown South, (2) provide incentives (results-based overtime) for officers to spend additional time in Georgetown South, (3) create and promote an anonymous tip line in Spanish for residents to report crimes without fear of being identified by police or criminals.

Recruitment and Leadership Development:

- Recruited 3 new members: Temple Rodef Shalom, St. Mark's RC, Accotink Unitarian Universalist
- Sent 60+ VOICE leaders to Metro IAF national, regional, and local organizing/leadership training.