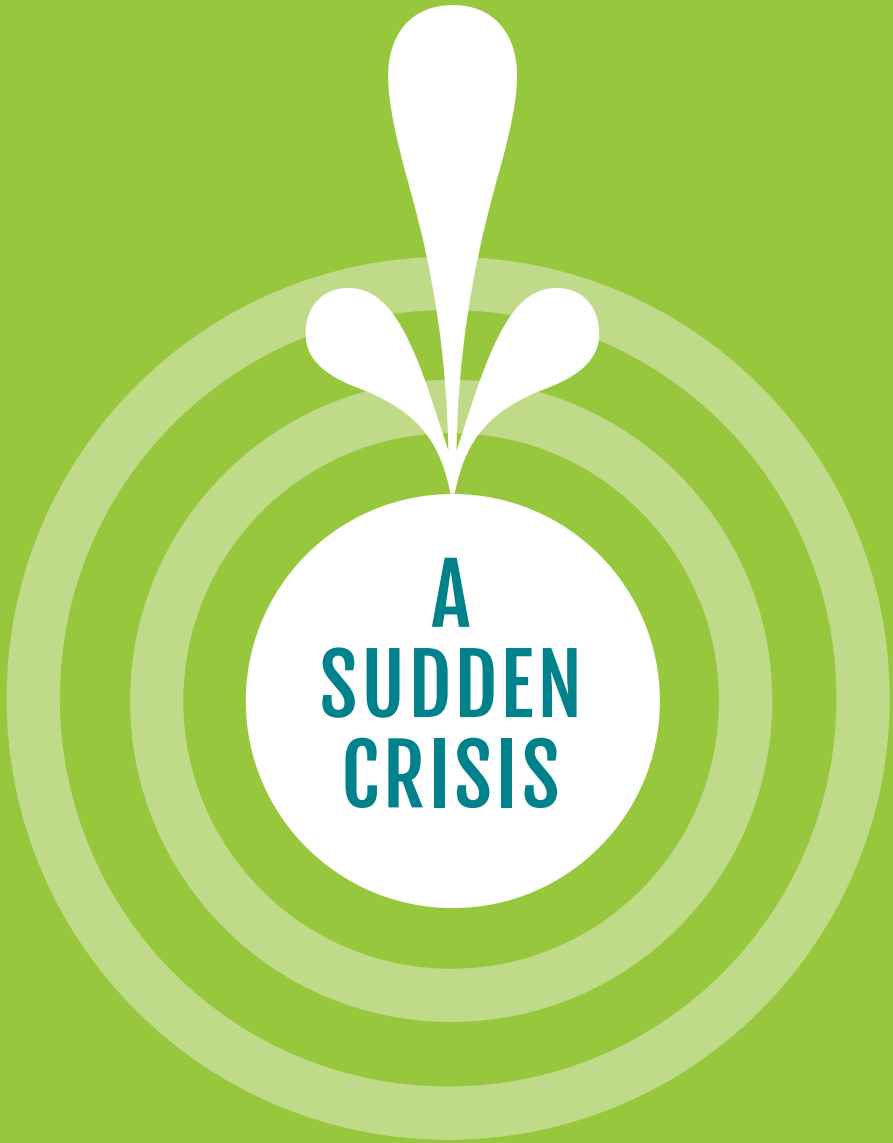


Sharing stories that **IMPACT** Pittsburgh's neighborhoods



An instructional experience:

**THE CHALLENGE OF COMBATING
DISPLACEMENT AT PENN PLAZA**



Our mission is to support the people,
organizations and partnerships
committed to creating and maintaining
healthy neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Allies provides practical research and other publications to provide practitioners, funders and policy makers with insights, explorations and practices that will inform and support the community development field.

***We share this story with you to inspire
action and empower leaders and residents
in other communities to actively shape the
future of their neighborhoods.***

— Presley L. Gillespie
President, Neighborhood Allies



Case Study Report:

A SUDDEN CRISIS

THE CHALLENGE OF COMBATING DISPLACEMENT AT PENN PLAZA

Lillian Grate sensed it coming. It was the summer of 2015. She had worked at a neighborhood community development corporation years earlier and understood the fresh ground markings outside the Penn Plaza apartment complex where she lived meant a development project of some kind was in the offing.

She knew that East Liberty, her neighborhood in the City of Pittsburgh, was experiencing a resurgence of popularity and that land suitable for new development was at a premium. And she was well aware that apartments charging rents she could afford —like the one in Penn Plaza that she had shared with her 9-year-old son for five years—were growing scarce.

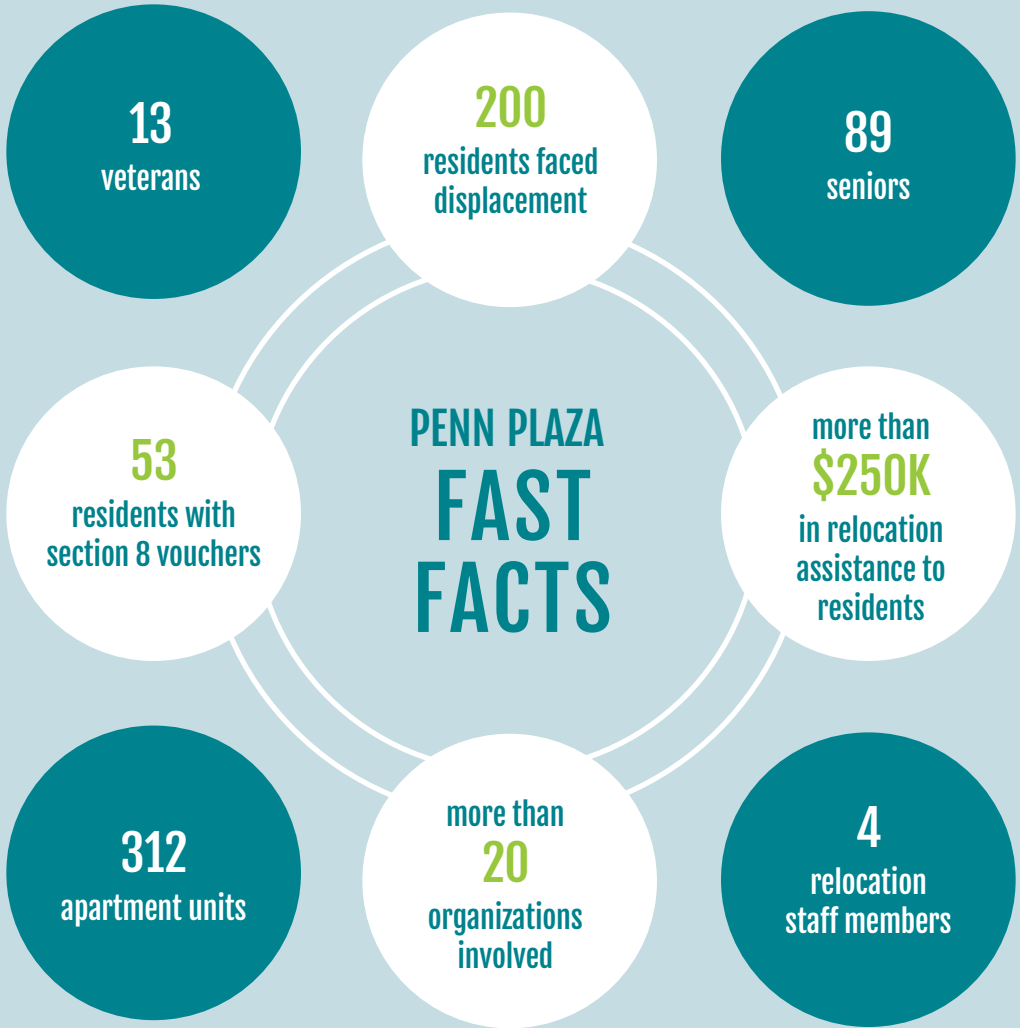
“We were the last of those kinds of buildings: 1960s infrastructure, architecture, not the best of places, had some issues,” said Grate, who was employed as a mental health therapist specializing in trauma at the time. “It didn’t fit with what was happening in East Liberty. I knew [the owners] could make a lot more money with these units than they were. And they had started switching people over to monthly leases.

“I was like, ‘This is about to be over. I have to find a place to live.’”

Within six weeks, tenants began receiving notices that confirmed Grate’s suspicions. Their month-to-month leases would not be renewed.

“When it first happened, there were so many unknowns,” said Grate, whose mother and an elderly cousin were also Penn Plaza residents. “All I knew was I had to take care of my family. There was so much stress. When I realized I might not be able to live in the city, that kicked my stress up a notch.”

>> (continued on p. 4)



There is a shortage of **17,241** affordable and available rental units in Pittsburgh for households at or below 50% of the city's median household income.*

*"FY 2018 Income Limits Summary," FY 2018 Income Limits Documentation System, HUD User, accessed June 26, 2018, www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2018/2018summary.odn

<< (continued from p. 2)

She was not alone. Beginning that summer, some 200 tenants living in the two East Liberty Penn Plaza apartment buildings would receive similar notices.

Many were elderly. Only about 1 in 4 had housing vouchers to help offset the cost of having to pay higher rents elsewhere. Most had incomes low enough that having to pay market rates in the neighborhood out of pocket would be a severe financial hardship, if not out of the question.

They also faced the prospect of quickly moving to new housing without the help of federal relocation subsidies.

City officials found themselves without legal leverage to stop the owner from closing the privately owned buildings, which were not bound by federal Section 8 housing rules.

And a comprehensive strategy and coordinated network of support for relocating so many tenants facing such circumstances had yet to be developed in the city, county or region.

An emergency strategy for relocating Penn Plaza tenants was conceived in a matter of weeks and unfolded over the following 18 months, involving the mayor's office, city and county agencies, nonprofits, community organizations, a private real estate acquisition firm, teams of volunteers and others committed to helping tenants avoid homelessness.

This is the story of their response, the challenges encountered and the lessons learned.

The neighborhood

The fortunes of the city's East Liberty neighborhood have been susceptible to dramatic peaks and sharp declines over the past seven decades.

In the 1950s, it stood as one of the city's most robust neighborhoods with a business district that ranked third largest in the state behind center-city Philadelphia and Downtown Pittsburgh.

But the 1960s brought decades of decline. East Liberty was not immune to the flight from the city to the suburbs that had rippled across America. And an ill-conceived urban renewal program did further damage. The experiment demolished 1,200 houses, contracted the business district by 1 million square feet, reengineered Penn Avenue in ways that choked traffic along the main artery, and hardened the neighborhood's image as a place to avoid rather than the destination planners had envisioned.

East Liberty experienced a period of disinvestment, higher crime rates, higher poverty rates, an exodus of hundreds of businesses and nearly half of the neighborhood population, and a spike in vacant and abandoned properties.

Penn Plaza was built during that period. By the early 2000s, government housing restrictions attached to the properties had expired and Penn Plaza stood as naturally occurring affordable housing in a neighborhood transforming itself, again.

>> (continued on p. 7)



“We didn’t have the legal leverage to stop the owner from closing the privately-owned building, and knew that the residents living in Penn Plaza needed and deserved comprehensive support that entailed not only finding new and affordable housing but also connecting with other resources.

This meant we had to find the right partner to implement new and creative solutions to help support these residents and connect them with the resources they desperately needed. Neighborhood Allies was able to convene and manage a fantastic team of allies that helped tenants locate decent, safe, and affordable housing, and connect them with social services they needed along the way.”

– *William Peduto, Pittsburgh Mayor*

*Residents Myrtle Stern and Mabel Duffy stand outside
the Penn Plaza apartment complex in March 2017.*



“It was triage right from the start.”

*– Zak Thomas, senior program officer for
community development lending, Neighborhood Allies*

<< (continued from p. 4)

With its confusing thoroughfares having been remedied, businesses started to return. With renewed interest in urban living, East Liberty's popularity began to rise among those looking for a place in the city to call home.

From 2000 to 2008 the median housing value in the neighborhood climbed 34 percent to nearly \$69,000, which was above the citywide average. The trend continued in the years that followed, spilling into the business district, which attracted a number of major retailers, such as Target and Whole Foods, an Ace Hotel, and bistros and cafes. High-end apartment buildings emerged, some commanding monthly rents upwards of \$3,000.

The long-sought revitalization was not without risks, as noted by East Liberty Development, Inc. in the neighborhood CDC's 2010 community plan: "With rising housing values comes the challenge to continue providing high-quality housing options for all, so that our community remains diverse and inclusive."

By 2015, Penn Plaza was an aged and worn island of affordable housing on a prime location in one of the city's hottest real estate markets. The owner was not blind to the opportunity.

Leases won't be renewed

Kevin Acklin, Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto's chief of staff until December 2017, said he first learned of Penn Plaza's intentions to vacate the apartments from state Rep. Ed Gainey, a Democrat serving the 24th Legislative District, which includes East Liberty.

Gainey had heard about it from tenants thrown into crisis when notified that their month-to-month leases weren't being renewed and they'd be without a place to live in a matter of weeks. "There was a creation of hysteria, which was unfortunate," Acklin said.

The mayor had recently endorsed "p4," a broad strategy to develop the city along the principles of sustainability, which included making sure enough affordable apartments and houses are in the housing mix. And it emphasized, "retaining long-time, local residents that may be threatened by displacement due to gentrification or other influences of development."

The city had also convened an Affordable Housing Task Force drawn from a cross-section of the community. Its report would find, among other things, that although 10 percent of housing in the city was income-restricted, another 17,241 affordable units were still needed for families earning 50 percent of the median household income or less.

The problem is national in scope. Housing that very-low income families can afford fell by 60 percent in the United States from 2010 to 2016, according to a 2017 analysis by Freddie Mac, a government-backed mortgage lender. And the rate of homeless Americans rose in 2017 for the first time in seven years, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reported.

The affordable housing shortage in the City of Pittsburgh is evidence of a growing regional issue. “The supply of affordable housing is shrinking,” said Charles Keenan, housing coordinator for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. “I’ve been working in this field for 20 years. It’s always been a tight market, but it hasn’t been this tight that I can remember.”

News of the Penn Plaza closings rippled through city hall. Officials scrambled to determine how the city could intervene, including the mayor and his staff; Councilman Rev. Ricky Burgess, whose district includes East Liberty; the Urban Redevelopment Authority and others.

“This was a stock of privately owned affordable housing. It was completely private property. No public money other than Section 8 vouchers [held by some residents] was involved. There were no laws being broken,” Acklin said. “But we saw it as a moral responsibility of the city to invest in and defend people. Some [tenants] had lived there for decades. A lot of them were elderly. Some were disabled. They were in a disadvantaged position of power.”

The city’s legal options were few. Eminent domain was explored, but found unsuitable. An offer by the city to buy the buildings was turned down. Subsidies under the Uniform Relocation Act that would help tenants make the transition to new apartments didn’t apply.

“We weren’t prepared as a matter of law in terms of the protections that needed to be put in place to prevent situations like this, and, financially, the resources weren’t there to provide for this type of relocation,” Acklin said.

The city did have a card to play. Once Penn Plaza was razed, any new development would need planning commission approval and any zoning issues would need to be resolved with the city. Such leverage opened the door to talks with the owner over easing the crisis, helping tenants move to new apartments and preventing the worst-case scenario of leaving some homeless.

A strategy emerges

Negotiations began shortly after tenants started being notified their leases were ending. Among those at the table were Penn Plaza residents Lillian Grate, her mother, Gail Williams, and Robert Jamison who served as a tenant council to represent the other tenants who lost their leases.

“**We understood we didn’t have a leg to stand on.** They were doing everything legally,” Grate said. “But morally, it was the timing of it—there was no time for people in the building to prepare.”

City officials and the tenant council negotiated a legal memorandum of understanding with the owner that provided tenants with some degree of relief. For example:

- An agreement was reached to stagger the closing of the two buildings to allow about half of the residents significantly more time to find new housing. The building at 5704 Penn Ave. would close 90 days after the agreement was signed. But the deadline was extended for the second building, 5600 Penn Ave., where residents were given one year to leave.

>> (continued on p. 13)



Neighborhood Allies worked to ensure that tenants were being supported and connected to resources throughout the process to minimize hardships of relocation.





Engage

Giving Tenants A Voice

**Tenant council helped resolve
the relocation crisis**



Robert Jamison and Gail Williams formed a tenant council to represent and advocate for Penn Plaza residents.

For Gail Williams, the sudden posting of notices on the doors of her neighbors at the Penn Plaza apartments warning them that their monthly leases would not be renewed was an injustice “on a massive scale.”

“It wasn’t justified because the notices could’ve gone out sooner,” said Williams, a tenant at 5704 Penn Ave. who also received notice she would have to move out in a month. “A property owner might know years in advance what they’re doing with the property. They’re lining up architects. They know in advance. Let us prepare to move into a suitable place while we still have housing. What they did wasn’t right.”

She contacted state Rep. Ed Gainey, who, in turn, alerted city officials to the brewing crisis. In short order, Williams, her daughter, Lillian Grate, and Robert Jamison were selected to a tenant council to represent Penn Plaza residents.

Their role over the following months included identifying the specific needs of the tenants who were being forced to move and joining Mayor William Peduto’s staff at the bargaining table, where they negotiated a legal agreement with the Penn Plaza owner that included financial aid and other support for displaced tenants.

They began meeting regularly with tenants in the two buildings, listening to their concerns, and learning about the circumstances they faced and the type of support they could use to help ease their transition to new housing.

Knowing their neighbors

Their inventory of what tenants needed offered insight into the complexities of the task at hand and identified demands to be negotiated. They identified tenants with disabilities. Many tenants

were elderly. Most couldn’t afford market rate housing. Access to transportation, and proximity to family and others in their support network were important considerations. The trauma that came with suddenly being evicted was another issue they were dealing with.

“We understood who lived in our building and who faced hardships. We knew that some tenants were not able to do this on their own,” Grate said. “It was overwhelming for some people.”

Kevin Acklin, Mayor Peduto’s chief of staff at the time, described the negotiations with Penn Plaza owners as, “bare-knuckle. Everything was fought for.” The owner had no legal obligation to give tenants any type of support. The owner would, however, need city planning and zoning approval to redevelop the site.

The tenant council won concessions on several key demands. At the top of the list was more time. The owner agreed to extend the deadline for moving out of the 5704 Penn Ave. to 90 days and delay closing 5600 Penn Ave. for a year. “That was the first big win,” Grate said.

When 5704 Penn Ave. closed, several tenants still looking for permanent housing were allowed to move into the other building while they continued their search — another key provision of the agreement negotiated by the tenant council. And the owner agreed to pay tenants moving subsidies ranging from \$800–\$1,600.

An on-site relocation office was also opened with a full-time staff to assist tenants find, secure and move to new housing. The tenant council had a hand in selecting Interstate Acquisitions Services to manage the office. The relocation office proved to be a critical part of the support network, Williams said. “They were people oriented, they had compassion for the people. They didn’t mind going out of their way. There was love there.”



Former Penn Plaza resident Geary Rivers was one of the last to move before the complex was demolished. A Vietnam War Veteran, Rivers was not able to find replacement housing in East Liberty, but did find a new home in Wilkinsburg — close to the church where he was baptized nearly 70 years ago.



“The supply of affordable housing is shrinking. It’s always been a tight market, but it hasn’t been this tight, that I can remember.”

**– Charles Keenan, housing coordinator,
Allegheny County Department of Human Services**

<< (continued from p. 8)

- Several apartments were secured at 5600 Penn Ave. as temporary emergency housing for 5704 Penn Ave. residents who were still looking for a permanent place to live when their 90-day move-out deadline expired.

- The owner agreed to pay tenants a flat-rate moving allowance to help with relocation costs. Tenants of the first building to close received \$1,600 while tenants of the final building to close received \$800.

To manage the relocation, the city selected Neighborhood Allies, a local community development nonprofit partner whose work is focused on bringing hope, fresh ideas, expertise and resources to distressed and transitional neighborhoods.

One of the first orders of business was to establish an on-site relocation office in the 5600 Penn Ave. building to help tenants find, secure and move into new housing. Interstate Acquisition Services (IAS), which specializes in rights-of-way and real estate acquisitions, was hired to manage the daily operations of the office.

'Triage'

The clock was ticking when Neighborhood Allies assumed management of the effort to find and transition Penn Plaza residents to new housing. Neither Neighborhood Allies nor IAS had ever dealt with a crisis quite like the confluence of circumstances and challenges that defined the Penn Plaza mass relocation.

The lack of time wasn't the only challenge: 200 residents needed new housing, half within three months; affordable housing was scarce in East Liberty, where many wanted to stay; many tenants were elderly; some had disabilities; most were low-income households; and none were eligible for Uniform Relocation Act subsidies to help offset higher rents elsewhere and widen their housing options.

"It was triage from the start," said Zak Thomas, Neighborhood Allies senior program officer for community development lending who oversaw the relocation effort for the nonprofit.

Neighborhood Allies and IAS developed a plan for action while the relocation office was staffed, computers and other office equipment installed and notices were sent to tenants letting them know there was on-site help available to them.

Services essential to relocating so many tenants became clear early on. They included:

- Assembling a comprehensive inventory of available affordable housing and keeping it up to date.
- Helping people understand what was required to secure new housing, including the requirements of the Penn Plaza memorandum of understanding, landlord requirements, rental histories, federal housing vouchers, waiting lists and housing applications.
- Some tenants needed intermediaries to resolve issues encountered with landlords or in other matters, such as getting various applications processed and arranging for social services.
- Some needed transportation to visit prospective apartments outside the neighborhood.
- Nearly all needed help physically moving their belongings from their Penn Plaza apartment to new housing.

The initial focus was on tenants of 5704 Penn Ave., the first building scheduled to close. The early round of relocations was complicated by the fact the relocation office was new and unfamiliar and the tenants they were trying to help were still coming to grips with suddenly having to leave.

“We didn’t have the opportunity to build a long-term relationship with the tenants and build trust, which I think everyone would agree you need to do to be effective at this,” Thomas said. “We weren’t able to do that for the folks who had three months to move out.

“At first, I think, some people associated us with the owner. We’d talk to the property manager and many things that were happening were directed through the owner. The more they associated us with the owner, the less trust we were going to get.”

Tenants were sent a letter introducing them to the relocation office and the services it offered, which changed as time went on and their needs became more apparent. For example, when scheduling appointments with tenants to discuss their individual situations proved ineffective, drop-in hours were expanded to 8 AM to 8 PM daily and free coffee and donuts were offered.

It also helped that the relocation office staff included a registered nurse, who could help tenants with health issues and disabilities. And IAS kept the staff consistent. “We found that having the same people in the office consistently served the people better. The people recognized the faces and it helped with trust,” said Ken Hawker, IAS project manager.

As the months passed, other challenges arose for the relocation office. Tenants handled having to move in different ways. For various reasons, several dozen were slow to decide where they wanted to move to and pursue new housing.

“People had to make hard decisions,” Thomas said. “At the end of the day, people might have 10 preferences for an apartment, price, location, quality, accessibility. But they weren’t going to get all of those. They weren’t finding the equivalent of Penn Plaza out there. Now, they had to make compromises talking to someone they didn’t fully trust. In a lot of cases, they didn’t have family members to help. We were their only connection.

“The better relationships we had with people, the more likely they were to follow through on that. We just needed them to open up with us.”

The circumstances of those tenants intensified the work of the relocation office as their move-out deadlines neared.

“We took a more hands-on approach as the deadline approached,” Hawker said. “Some people needed help with things that many people take for granted, in addition to having to have money available to help pay the first month’s rent. We were taking people to get photo IDs because theirs had expired, helping them get birth certificates reissued because they didn’t have a copy, and some needed extra assistance to get their applications processed.”

>> *(continued on p. 21)*

Mabel Duffy on March 25, 2017 — the day she moved out of her Penn Plaza apartment.



“It was dangerously, stressfully close to the deadline for those families. They were wearing that stress. They were down to the wire and didn’t have any place to go.”

– Tammy Thompson, East Liberty Development Inc. and Open Hand Ministries



Support

Proactive Problem-Solving

Inside the Penn Plaza Relocation Office



The staff of the relocation office worked closely with Penn Plaza residents to provide them the opportunity to locate decent, safe, and affordable housing, as well as connecting them with social services. Pictured are relocation office staff members Claire Hortens of Neighborhood Allies, and Ken Hawker of Interstate Acquisition Services (IAS).

John visited the Penn Plaza relocation office just about every day when he was searching for another place to live after being told his apartment building was being closed and razed. Donna found face-to-face assistance and, sometimes, a ride to look at possible housing options

Within a month after Penn Plaza tenants were notified they had to move, The relocation office, which was created on the fly, emerged as an important resource for helping them find and move to new housing on short notice.

Interstate Acquisitions Service (IAS), a firm that specializes in acquiring rights-of-way and real estate, managed the office. But neither IAS nor Neighborhood Allies, the community nonprofit charged with overseeing the relocation, had experience with a housing crisis the likes of Penn Plaza, which involved about 200 tenants with a diverse range of needs.

“We didn’t understand the full complexity and involvement until we got into it and talked to people and began to understand what they needed to move to another place,” said Ken Hawker, IAS project manager.

Working out of the 5600 Penn Ave. apartment building, the full-time relocation office staff offered tenants support ranging from an updated inventory of available housing and rides to help with applications and connections to agencies and nonprofits that might assist them with legal, financial and other matters.

“They’ve taken us where we need to go,” said Donna, a tenant with heart and breathing issues that made taking the bus and apartment hunting

a challenge. “They have had time to sit with us, and point out what kind of forms we needed. It’s a slow process. Like building a home, the foundation has to be strong.”

John, who is in his 50s, visited the relocation office frequently. The support he received included rides to check out apartments, and help with applications, medical documents, getting a copy of his birth certificate and other demands that having to move requires. He was able to find an apartment before his deadline to move from Penn Plaza expired. But this wasn’t the first time he’d been forced to move and having to do so again was upsetting.

“I feel like I’m going back right to where I started from,” he said. “I’m from the Hill. I lived in East Liberty, Wilkinsburg, Homewood. It angers me, traumatizes me, that I can’t take my grandkids’ hands and show them the places I came from and tell them they’ll be able to do the same things I did there.”

Like John, all of the Penn Plaza tenants found other housing before the apartment complex closed its doors. But it came down to the wire for some tenants. Those who hadn’t secured new housing as their move-out date neared proved to be the most challenging for relocation staff.

“At that point, every single one of them was different,” said Claire Hortens, a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work and Neighborhood Allies intern who was providing intensive case management as part of on the offerings of the relocation office staff.

“There was no silver bullet,” Hortens said. “We needed to be prepared to be extremely proactive and problem-solving as case managers — not relocation agents — around their specific needs.”





History

The Penn Plaza Apartments

Designed by Pittsburgh architect Tasso Katselas in the Brutalist style of architecture that was popular throughout the 1960s, Penn Plaza was part of East Liberty's urban renewal of that time. Built at the corner of Penn and Negley Avenues, the mid-century modern complex featured individually controlled heat and air conditioning, automatic elevators, fireproof and soundproof rooms, and laundry facilities for its residents. Often incorporating exposed concrete and brick, other well-known designs by Katselas's firm include the main building of the CCAC the North Side, the County Jail on Second Avenue, and the Pittsburgh International Airport terminal.

Built in
1968

Tasso G.
Katselas,
Architect

312
apartment units

The Penn Plaza apartment complex in East Liberty, as it looked in winter 2017, prior to demolition.

5600 & 5704
Penn Ave.

9-acre
property located in
East Liberty

Demolition
began in June
2017



One Day

Claire's Typical Day At The Office

The Penn Plaza relocation office was open from 8 AM to 8 PM daily. For relocation staff member Claire Hortens, a typical day at the office was a busy one. Here is a glimpse of her schedule on a typical Friday when the work of the relocation office was in full bloom.

10 – 11:30 AM

Attends a supervision/field placement meeting.

11:30 AM – 12:45 PM

Claire discusses the day's apartment visit schedule with Ken Hawker, project manager for Interstate Acquisitions Service, the firm hired to manage the office. Recent developments in one tenant's housing plan are also discussed.

12:45 – 1:30 PM

She meets with a tenant to confirm her decision to move into a Section 8 property. They discuss packing, moving and move-in costs, and discuss next steps.

1:30 – 2 PM

Claire takes a mid-day break.

2 – 3 PM

She discusses affordable furniture sources with another family of tenants. They also discuss other concerns they have about new apartment. Claire made a furniture resource list and posts it on bulletin board as a reference for other tenants.

3 – 4 PM

Claire calls and leaves a message with the Section 8 housing specialist about another resident's move-out papers. She visits the Penn Plaza rental office to request a letter of recommendation for a different tenant who needs it for an apartment application,

and calls and emails the tenant to suggest he send applications to two apartment buildings.

4 – 4:30 PM

She calls two other tenants to discuss their housing search.

4:30 – 5 PM

Claire calls the rental office of a building where a tenant is experiencing a delay in preliminary steps of relocation to discuss the issues holding up the process. The discussion ends with the rental office assuring her that the tenant will be receiving a move-in date soon.

5:00 – 5:30 PM

She contacts a representative of the non-profit Community Health Services to discuss the possibility of getting a move-in expense grant to help ease the relocation of an elderly tenant who is still looking for another apartment as her deadline to vacate Penn Plaza nears.

5:30 – 6 PM

Claire compiles final notes for the day, sends emails to relocation team outlining the next steps for residents who need to follow up on apartment leads on Monday, and finishes her documentation and charting before calling it a day.



The community responds

It wasn't long after tenants were notified they were being forced to move out of the Penn Plaza apartments that their plight and the scramble to find them shelter became a high-profile story covered in the local newspapers, and on television and radio news broadcasts.

Protests from affordable housing advocates followed. So did a groundswell of support for the relocation effort that Neighborhood Allies, working with IAS and the tenant council, was able to mobilize. The mass relocation rallied support from city and county offices and agencies, nonprofits, community organizations, individual volunteers and others.

The relocation office organized on-site open houses for tenants to meet with local organizations to learn about the services they could offer them. One, for example, featured Community Health Services, whose representative processed payments from the nonprofit's housing assistance program to help more than one dozen Penn Plaza tenants with the first month's rent in their new apartments.

The list of organizations grew as the relocation effort matured with organizations ranging from the Urban League and Neighborhood Legal Services to the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Allegheny Link offering tenants help with personal, financial, legal and housing issues that stood in the way of finding them a new place to live.

DHS was involved early and became an important liaison between the relocation office and Penn Plaza residents who received mental health and other services from the county agency. The human service history and needs of those tenants were off limits to relocation office staff due to privacy restrictions under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

"If we couldn't fully understand a person's circumstances, we weren't working with a full deck of cards," Thomas said. "So, we gave [DHS] our list and asked, 'If you have any of these people in your system, please do what you can to help them.' They were able to help under the rules they have to operate under."

The Penn Plaza relocation also became a regular topic discussed at meetings of the DHS-chaired Local Housing Options Team, a group of organizations that troubleshoots housing issues. The volunteer group includes housing agencies, developers, nonprofits, advocates and others, such as the Pittsburgh Housing Authority, Action Housing and the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania.

Neighborhood Allies would report on the issues the relocation effort encountered and what was needed to overcome them. And the group would often respond with offers of staff, expertise and resources. For example, the Housing Connector, a joint housing placement program of DHS and the nonprofit Action Housing, provided intensive case management to help hard-to-place tenants find new apartments.

Packing and moving tenants from Penn Plaza to their new homes was a formidable demand that was met, in large part, by volunteers. Members of organizations such as Soldier On and the affordable housing advocacy group, Homes For All, were among the volunteers who helped as was a local platoon of The Mission Continues, a community service group of post 9/11 veterans.

Individual Pittsburgh residents also joined the cause. One was Jason Vrabel, a local writer who focuses on housing issues. He came to Penn Plaza to write about it and ended up helping tenants find new housing, pack and move. "It was impossible to just stand around and watch," he said.

Every Friday for longer than a year, representatives of Neighborhood Allies, IAS and the tenant council would meet with the mayor's staff to review, line-by-line, the list of tenants still in need of housing and discuss the status of each, their challenges and what could be done to help them.

>> (continued on p. 27)



Collaboration

Roles of Organizations at Penn Plaza

When market forces in gentrifying neighborhoods push out longstanding, low-income residents, it takes tremendous effort and resources to rehouse those who've lost their homes. Every resident's relocation needs are different, because it is contextual to the neighborhood, the nature of the housing from which the tenants are being displaced and, most important, the needs of the tenants cannot be predicted in advance. It took many partners and lots of volunteers that were willing to go on that journey with us and were willing to rise to meet any number of needs that couldn't have been predicted when outlining the scope of work. The support offered at Penn Plaza entailed everything from the identification of a regularly updated list of replacement dwellings and assistance accessing relocation payments to access to a computer, free internet and phone, moving supplies, transportation and connection to human and social services.

Housing Services

- **Housing Alliance of PA** — housingalliancepa.org — Provided information on potential housing units and landlords for tenants to relocate to and connect with
- **Interstate Acquisition Services (IAS)** — iasrw.com — Contracted to set-up and run the on-site relocation office for tenants; helped with logistics; compiled affordable housing resources for the residents
- **Oakland Planning and Development Corp** — opdc.org — Provided information on potential housing units and landlords for tenants to relocate to and connect with
- **Housing Connector Program** — housingalliancepa.org — Gave priority to some of the residents for apartments that were opening up; helped with moving
- **Action Housing** — actionhousing.org — Advocated for the residents and provided housing for veterans

Volunteer Services

- **Pittsburgh United** — pittsburghunited.org — Brought in volunteers to help tenants move
- **Homes For All** — homesforallpgh.org — Brought in volunteers to help final tenants move leaving second building—packing materials, transportation
- **Soldier On** — wesoldieron.org — Helped residents with moving their belongings
- **Oakland Planning and Development Corp** — opdc.org — Gave priority to some of the residents for apartments that were opening up; helped with moving
- **The Mission Continues** — missioncontinues.org — Convened and led volunteers to help residents pack and move to new residences

Human Services

- **Area Agency on Aging** — alleghenycounty.us/human-services/about/offices/area-agency-on-aging — Provided social services for tenants age 60 and over
- **Family Links** — familylinks.org — Waived certain age and demographic requirements to provide social services to tenants in need
- **Interstate Acquisition Services (IAS)** — iasrw.com — Contracted to set-up and run the on-site relocation office for tenants; helped with logistics; compiled affordable housing resources for the residents
- **Veterans Affairs** — pittsburgh.va.gov — Attempted to ensure that tenants who were veterans were supported with medical needs; other human needs
- **Action Housing** — actionhousing.org — Advocated for the residents
- **Department of Human Services** — alleghenycounty.us/human-services — Provided emergency Shelter Allowance
- **Neighborhood Legal Services** — nlsa.us — Provided much-needed legal services for one or more tenants

PENN PLAZA SUPPORT

Financial Support

- **Urban League** — ulpgh.org — Provided initial monetary support to tenants who were struggling to fund their moving costs
- **Community Human Services** — chscorp.org/service-area/housing-assistance-programs — Provided emergency relocation funding (security deposits, 1st months rent, etc.) for several of the final remaining residents
- **Heinz Endowments** — heinz.org — Provided financial support to operate the relocation office and provide services
- **City of Pittsburgh/URA** — ura.org — Provided funding for relocation services connection to replacement housing



Service

Help, Military Style

Veterans group put their backs into moving tenants



The Mission Continues showed up on numerous occasions with boxes, moving trucks and volunteers to help residents pack up and move to their new homes.

When Neighborhood Allies reached out to their ally and grantee, The Mission Continues, to see if they would be able to assist residents in packing up their apartments and moving them into new residences, Matt Landis and his fellow post 9/11 veterans were all in.

Landis first learned of the Penn Plaza relocation from reading about the crisis in the newspaper. He served two tours in Iraq with the U.S. Army. After his service, he headed to Pittsburgh to continue his education. There, he joined the local branch of The Mission Continues, a national community service organization made up of post 9/11 military veterans.

The request to help ease the tenant crisis at Penn Plaza seemed like the perfect fit for him and a proper first-project for the Pittsburgh 2nd Service Platoon of The Mission Continues, which he led.

“I thought this is exactly the kind of thing The Mission Continues is uniquely equipped to help with,” Landis said. “It was a tough emotional thing for a lot of different people. And there was a political element to it and community leaders. That’s the sort of thing that veterans have always done. There’s always a political element swirling around and emotional elements.”

“Veterans are equipped to go in and say, ‘this is what needs to be done’ and execute. Do what’s best for the humans involved and not worry about the politics. Community leaders will handle that.”

The Mission Continues was one of several local community organizations that brought volunteers to help move displaced Penn Plaza tenants at no cost.

Providing the muscle

Over two weekends in February 2016, crews of about 50 volunteers from The Mission Continues

put their muscle behind the move from 5704 Penn Ave., the first apartment building to be closed. They rented two trucks. And anyone who had a large vehicle brought it along. They moved couches, mattresses, lamps; they dumped bags of trash — anything to help the residents move into 5600 Penn Ave. on a temporary basis, or to other housing they found elsewhere.

“Moving an elderly woman to the North Side was particularly memorable,” Landis said. “Her family had been in East Liberty for three generations. She talked about going to [what is today] Bakery Square when she was a kid — how she could smell them baking cookies and how they would walk over and get free samples. She was excited about the place she had gotten at Roosevelt Arms [on the North Side]. She wasn’t completely bereaved, but you could feel the sadness about losing that connection to that legacy in East Liberty.”

Now focused on serving the city’s Homewood neighborhood, the 2nd Service Platoon applies to its community-driven approach to service lessons learned from its Penn Plaza experience, in addition to those learned from military missions abroad.

“Communities in Iraq say, ‘OK these guys are coming to help. But on a historic level, what can they really do to help? They’ve come here before, left before and nothing really positive happened. They have a history of doing that kind of thing.’ Similarly in Homewood, there’s a history of people coming in to help and not really following up. We know what it’s like to make mistakes, and over-reach, where we thought they wanted something and we gave them something they didn’t want.”

“We don’t do anything people don’t ask for, or anything that isn’t driven by them,” Landis said. “We find a community leader who’s involved. We stand behind them, have them be the centerpiece. We provide support and muscle. And we never celebrate victory. It’s just one little thing. They have decades of need and people have been working for decades to meet those needs.”



*Myrtle Stern in her Penn Plaza apartment on her moving day.
Myrtle first relocated to Verona, but has since settled in Homewood.*



“The city as a housing market, is very unforgiving in ways it wasn’t before.”

– Jason Vrabel, local writer and relocation volunteer

No one left homeless

The first building scheduled to close, 5704 Penn Ave., did so on February 28, 2016. Most, but not all, of its former tenants had secured new permanent housing when it was shuttered on that winter day. Those still looking were offered temporary quarters in apartments vacated at the 5600 Penn Ave. building, where the deadline to vacate was a little more than year away.

On March 31, 2017, 5600 Penn Ave. was emptied of residents, closing the chapter on the Penn Plaza complex where people with low-to-moderate incomes had found an affordable place to live for nearly four decades.

Among the last to leave were four tenants still searching for permanent housing a few weeks before the deadline. Those tenants, all adults over the age of 50, were among the most difficult to place for a number of reasons. One, for example, was dealing with serious health issues.

Neighborhood Allies worked with East Liberty Development, Inc. to find them temporary apartments in Mellon's Orchard, a complex three blocks away that is targeted for redevelopment. In addition, they were given intensive support to continue their search for a permanent home.

"It was dangerously, stressfully close to the deadline for those families. They were wearing that stress. They were down to the wire and didn't have anyplace to go," said Tammy Thompson, a consultant for East Liberty Development Inc. and a family counselor at Open Hand Ministries, a local community organization.

"The first thing was to get them to trust you enough that they understand you are there to help. How many people have they worked with over the last year who said they were there to help and here they are, having to move again, against their will. They were angry."

By October, two of the four former Penn Plaza tenants temporarily placed in Mellon's Orchard had found more permanent housing.

The same month, Penn Plaza's owners signed a consent order with the city that ended litigation over redevelopment of the apartment complex site and paved the way for it to begin. As part of the agreement, the developer agreed to use half of the tax abatement funds it received to acquire and develop affordable housing in the area, but not on the former Penn Plaza site itself.

"One of the fruits of the experience was the addition of some affordable housing near the former Penn Plaza apartments," Acklin said. "That's good, but not as good as it could be and certainly not commensurate with the displacement that occurred."

Most relocated tenants remained in the City of Pittsburgh and many found new housing in East Liberty or within a few miles. Several residents moved outside of the city. Some considered their new apartments a step up. For others, it was a lateral move. And some felt they'd taken a step backward after moving from Penn Plaza.

For many, the sudden upheaval, and the concern and uncertainty that came with it, had been a traumatic experience. But none of the 200 Penn Plaza residents who'd lost their lease were left homeless when the final building closed on a late winter day in 2017.

A map of the Pittsburgh area showing the relocation paths of residents. A teal arrow points from the top center towards the city. A green shaded area highlights the relocation paths, which are shown as light green lines. The map includes labels for Ross Township, Robinson Township, Scott Township, and Mount Lebanon. A blue river is shown winding through the area. A small airplane icon is visible on the left side. A black arrow points down from the top center towards the text box.

Moving

Resident Relocation

Most residents were able to remain in the City of Pittsburgh, many finding housing in East Liberty or close by in the East End. This map depicts where many of the tenants who worked with the relocation team moved. (Penn Plaza is indicated in green.)

Ross
Township

Robinson
Township

Scott Township

Mount Lebanon



Lessons learned

P*enn Plaza proved to be an instructional experience in relocating large numbers of tenants who require affordable housing.*

For those involved in the relocation effort, it quickly became clear that the task involves more than identifying affordable housing options and arranging for physically moving tenants and their belongings.

The needs of tenants varied and some presented obstacles to finding them new housing. Tenant health, age, disabilities, transportation needs and financial circumstances were often among the issues that had to be managed for relocation to be successful.

Trauma emerged as a common and potentially debilitating issue influencing the ability of tenants to smoothly make the transition to new housing and, in some cases, neighborhoods.

“The stress often goes unnoticed,” Thompson said. “If you have to be concerned day in and day out about whether you have somewhere to sleep, to live or to store your belongings, the anxiety is so high that it impacts every decision you make. The stress is almost paralyzing. That’s what I saw happening to the last families [to leave Penn Plaza]. They were paralyzed by fear of what was going to happen to them.”

The level of trust tenants had in those who were working to help them was another influential factor. Tenants wary of the relocation team’s intentions were more likely to resist help, which tended to delay their efforts to secure new housing and deepen their crises when deadlines to vacate the Penn Plaza buildings drew near.

Another lesson was just how important it is to deliberately plan for mobilizing residents quickly and assessing and addressing their needs early on. A pattern was seen as the deadline neared at both Penn Plaza buildings: In both cases, 20–30 tenants found themselves without prospects for housing with only weeks left to find a new place to live.

“Early on, you need a burst of activity—get people on wait lists, get them lined up for services, make sure everyone has driver’s licenses, a social security card, etc. Getting ahead of those issues are important because those are things that will surface at the end that make the process harder,” Thomas said. “People who did better for themselves often were the people who were the most aggressive in looking for a place to go, and getting on a wait list quickly, even if they didn’t move right away.”

The approach to helping the displaced Penn Plaza tenants, although cobbled together on the fly, offers a model for responding to similar crises.

Having a full-time, on-site relocation office, for example, was critical to managing the relocation of 200 tenants on a tight deadline and avoiding mass homelessness. The tenant council gave voice to those being displaced, negotiated moving subsidies and helped build a relationship between tenants and relocation staff providing assistance. Charging Neighborhood Allies with overseeing the relocation organized the work of disparate parties, provided

>> (continued on p. 33)

Vivian Campbell in the kitchen of her Penn Plaza apartment, March 2017.



“This isn’t a day of celebration, but an example of why we need better protections for low-income tenants in our city.”

– William Peduto, Pittsburgh Mayor

Myrtle Stern and Mabel Duffy stand outside the Penn Plaza apartment complex in March 2017.



“...we saw it as a moral responsibility of the city to invest in and defend people. Some [tenants] had lived there for decades. A lot of them were elderly. Some of them were disabled. They were in a disadvantaged position of power.”

– *Kevin Acklin, former mayoral Chief of Staff*

<< (continued from p. 30)

a central point of contact for troubleshooting problems that arose and helped to rally support from a network of nonprofit and government agencies.

The experience also highlighted the need for the city and region to be better prepared for having to relocate tenants from affordable housing whose budgets can't accommodate market rates.

Having a comprehensive, coordinated response strategy that today does not exist would help avoid delay and improve efficiency and outcomes. For example, ongoing assessment of local housing trends could help identify affordable housing vulnerable to market-rate redevelopment and lessen the chance of having to respond to a sudden crisis, as was the case with Penn Plaza. Pre-crisis planning among government and nonprofit agencies would help coordinate support ranging from human services to financial aid that several dislocated Penn Plaza tenants needed. The Penn Plaza experience also suggests that arranging ahead of time the resources necessary to implement a response would benefit future relocations.

"The process that Neighborhood Allies engaged in with Penn Plaza is not a sustainable option. We cannot rely upon nonprofit or private partner ad hoc relocation effort every time this happens," said Gerald Dickinson, an assistant law professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, and Neighborhood Allies Board Member whose interests include affordable housing law and policy. "Having something more concrete in place between the government, nonprofit and private sector would likely be the appropriate measure for that type of situation."

At the same time, Penn Plaza emphasized the need to consider policies and practices to better protect people who rely on affordable housing in the city and prevent another mass relocation crisis.

The city's Affordable Housing Task Force offered recommendations for stabilizing existing communities, creating more quality affordable housing and using community resources in ways that ensure lasting affordability. As the last Penn Plaza building closed, Mayor Peduto responded with a series of executive orders that propose ways to increase affordable housing, tenant protections and the ability of homeowners to withstand rising property taxes and other forces that pressure longtime residents of neighborhoods experiencing a resurgence in popularity and investment.

The displacement of Penn Plaza residents underscored the need for urgency. "The city, as a housing market, is very unforgiving today in ways it wasn't before. I can't imagine that it won't happen again," said Jason Vrabel, local writer and relocation volunteer. "You're not working from a position of strength when you are caught by surprise and reacting to a crisis. Will we be better prepared as first responders when something like the challenge of Penn Plaza happens again?" ●



Advocate

Policy Solutions

**Protecting vulnerable residents
from housing crises**



Kevin Acklin, Mayor Peduto's former chief of staff, shares the details of the agreement that was worked out to assist Penn Plaza residents relocate at a press conference.

When the final seven Penn Plaza tenants found another place to live, it was a moment of relief for those involved in the mass relocation that went down to the wire, and one of sober reflection.

“This is not a day of celebration, but an example of why we need better protections for low-income tenants in our city,” Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto said in a statement.

Some 200 Penn Plaza tenants lost their month-to-month leases and had to move on short notice from their apartments in the two-building complex of naturally occurring affordable housing. While a crisis of suddenly having to relocate so many people is an exception, the underlying issues are not.

States and cities across the United States are increasingly exploring policies to expand affordable housing inventories and strengthen tenant protections in response to the mounting challenges that beset vulnerable families in securing a decent place to live.

Gerald Dickinson, assistant law professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law and Neighborhood Allies Board Member, whose interests include land use, affordable housing law and policy and urban development said this:

“Penn Plaza, in some ways, is a case study of what the city and county could potentially do working from that experience. What kind of larger, more comprehensive project might the city or county implement to stop this from happening, because it’s likely to happen again.”

Changing the rules

In California, 170 communities have adopted inclusionary housing laws, also known as inclusionary zoning, to expand and preserve their inventory of affordable housing. The laws typically require a certain percentage of units in a development to be offered as affordable housing.

Newark, NJ requires new developments of 30 or more residential units to set aside 20 percent as affordable housing. And Philadelphia’s city council is debating a bill that includes mandatory affordable-housing set-asides in new developments.

In Pittsburgh, Mayor Peduto issued a series of executive orders last year aimed at increasing and preserving housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income residents. One proposal is to explore the use of inclusionary housing by creating a pilot zone in the city where new residential developments would be required to include a minimum percentage of affordable housing.

Just-cause eviction laws are gaining momentum across the country as a way of strengthening tenant protection. The laws, in general, narrow the reasons private landlords can evict tenants, and in some cases, require landlords to offer subsidies for moving and other expenses.


“Large-scale evictions are exceptions,” Dickinson said. “What is happening on a daily basis are individual tenant evictions. A lot of just-cause recommendations are to help soften the blow for families who are extremely at risk in these situations.”

Housing is critical to the wellbeing of families, as well as the communities in which they live, studies suggest. Princeton University sociologist Matthew Desmond, for example, found that about half of recently evicted mothers report multiple symptoms of clinical depression. Workers who have experienced an eviction are more likely to get laid off than those who’ve never been evicted. In Milwaukee, Desmond and colleagues reported that 1 in 4 poor residents who move do so involuntarily. And communities with high eviction rates tend to have higher rates of crime.

“Eviction does not simply drop poor families into a dark valley, a trying yet relatively brief detour on life’s journey. It fundamentally redirects their way, casting them onto a different and much more difficult path,” Desmond writes in his book, “Evicted.” “Eviction is a cause, not just a condition of poverty.”







*This report, published August 2018, is a project of **Neighborhood Allies**, created with funding from **The Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)** and **The Heinz Endowments**.*

Special thanks to those who were interviewed for this report: Lillian Grate, Gail Williams, Robert Jamison, Jason Vrabel, Kevin Acklin, Charles Keenan, Gerald Dickinson, Claire Hortens, Zak Thomas, Ken Hawker, Tammy Thompson, Matt Landis.

*Produced by: **Talia Piazza** | Written by: **Jeffery Fraser** | Design by: **Jennifer McNulty***

*Main photography courtesy of: **Maranie Rae Staab** pp. 6, 15, 26, 32, 36*

***Maranie Rae Staab / Public Source** pp. 12, 18-19, 31*

*Supporting photos by: **Talia Piazza** pp. 5, 10, 24, 34*



neighborhoodallies.org

