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*Solar thermal panel on the roof of **Woodlawn Center South** on the South Side of Chicago captures the sun's energy to generate hot water*

Building healthy, energy-efficient affordable housing no longer viewed as “too costly” for developers

*by Julie Klump, Manager of Design and Technical Services
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There was a time when the goals of creating environmentally-healthy housing, energy-efficient housing and affordable housing were not always in synch, but new technologies, materials and awareness have made it possible to change that perception.

Just a few decades ago, affordable housing developers thought they couldn't afford to build green, toxic-free housing at a reasonable cost, but that calculation failed to take into account the financial, social and health-related costs of *not* building healthy and energy-efficient affordable housing.

In the last eight years there has been great interest in incorporating healthy housing measures into voluntary green building programs. Initially the goals of the green programs were to save energy and protect the environment. Today the guidelines also address the indoor environment and its impact on resident health. The selection of building materials and the creation of air tight building envelopes (roofs and exterior walls) and proper ventilation systems can accomplish all three goals.

Lead paint exposure was one of the first chronic health issues to be identified as having a direct correlation with the materials used in the construction of the home in the 1970s. More recently, the alarming rate of asthma in children (another housing-related illness) can be linked to unhealthy indoor

air quality, particularly in low-income housing where conditions can be particularly unsafe for vulnerable children.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Healthy Homes Initiative builds upon earlier Lead Hazard Control programs to address a variety of environmental health and safety concerns including: mold, lead, allergens, asthma, carbon monoxide, home safety, pesticides, and radon. The Initiative takes a comprehensive approach to these activities by focusing on housing-related hazards in a coordinated fashion, rather than addressing a single hazard at a time.

According to a study released last month by the National Center for Healthy Housing (NCHH) which was funded by the HUD initiative, there was a significantly lower amount of lead dust in homes where all the windows were replaced twelve years ago —41% lower floor dust levels and 51% lower window sill dust levels—compared to homes where windows had been repaired. According to NCHH, taking into account energy efficiency and home improvement value, the net economic benefit of window replacement compared to window repair is \$1,700-\$2,000 more per home.

Effective greening programs address both sustainability and indoor environmental quality for better occupant health. Environmentally-conscious affordable housing developers will use products that contain little or no volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and avoid materials that are not durable or that are hard to clean. They will also create air-tight, well-insulated building envelopes in new construction or renovated buildings. Inside the units, it might be necessary to upgrade or install new ventilation systems to supply fresh air, remove stale air, and control humidity. These should be standard protocols for developers and owners regardless of whether or not they are following one of the voluntary green rating systems such as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design).

Once the retrofits and improvements to the units are made, resident engagement and education are key components to maximizing the benefits of green installations. The Enterprise Green Communities Program has developed “Resident Engagement Training in a Box” – resources for property owners, property managers and resident service staff to help educate residents on how to live in a green building and community and maintain a healthy home. At Preservation of Affordable Housing, we are using a Sustainability Training grant from Enterprise Communities to develop and implement a Living in a Green Healthy Home education program for the residents in our new and replacement housing in the Woodlawn section of Chicago.

As more affordable housing developers see the benefits of building healthier homes, the financial investment will become quickly apparent – not to mention the societal benefit of helping seniors, individuals and families to stay healthy.

Resources:

HUD Healthy Homes Program

http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/healthy_homes/hhi

National Center for Healthy Housing: <http://www.nchh.org/>

Enterprise Green Communities Resident Engagement: <http://www.enterprisecommunity.com/solutions-and-innovation/enterprise-green-communities/resources/resident-engagement>

Preservation of Affordable Housing, a nonprofit affordable housing developer based in Boston, was one of the country's first four recipients of a green retrofit grant funded by the [HUD Green Retrofit Program for Multifamily Housing](#).

POAH owns and maintains 7,000 affordable housing units in nine states and the District of Columbia and is actively engaged in greening its portfolio through solar power generation, building envelope improvements, water fixture and lighting retrofits, equipment upgrades and comprehensive green retrofits that include all of these components.