

## Utica Hearing testimony

### Gene A. Allen

The HomeOwnership Center's mission is the "Revitalization and Growth of Neighborhoods." In the mid 90's, we realized that if we wanted people to make a long term commitment to their neighborhood, either by purchasing their first home or fixing up their current residence, we needed to take a "whole neighborhood" approach and start to address quality of life issues.

This is where my Community Relations Department comes into play.

Community Building is based on the belief that people have the ability to name their problems and identify the additional information and resources they need to solve them. Community Building is a process that brings the talents, resources and skills of people in the community together to work for social change. It is more than mobilizing and service work. It involves leadership development, building relationships and consolidating thoughts and ideas into structures that create sustainable change.

The members of my department and I identify and develop leaders from within the neighborhoods as a means to empower residents to become catalysts for positive change. In this role, we provide the training and tools for them to use. We also provide information and training opportunities from the HomeOwnership Center's local, state and national affiliations.

We currently coordinate and support over 300 block associations and staff each of their meetings, which occur at least monthly.

Funding for Community Building is at an all time low. The majority of available funding is for start-up or time restrained initiatives. In addition, Community Building is not the type of program to which a fee for service can be readily attached. Funding for sustainability of these proven programs and strategies is virtually non-existent.

Working together - Works! The members of the Association of Block Coalitions (ABC) have advocated for and made some significant changes in local laws to improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods. Through their hard work and perseverance they got the Utica City Council to pass an improved Noise Ordinance, the implementation of a Nuisance Abatement Ordinance, No loitering Ordinance, and the Parent Responsibility Ordinance.

Working together, the residents started the Weed & Seed Programs in Utica and Rome. This program was initially established with federal funding and brought together members of the community and police departments to actively root out negative activity such as prostitution, drug dealers, and other crimes in neighborhoods.

Although, in Utica, this program no longer receives funding the partners continue to work together and have broadened their focus to fight the development of local gangs and the violence tied to them.

Each one of these initiatives and many more, have had a positive effect not only in individual neighborhoods but for the entire community. With the strengthening of our older neighborhoods, we see an increase in homeownership and new businesses, which have a positive economic impact for the entire community.

As I mentioned earlier, there is very little funding to support the community development work we do. This has already caused a drastic cut in the number of communities in which we can work and now the entire program is in jeopardy. Without the financial support we may not be able to continue supporting the activities and initiatives of the block associations and other grass roots groups trying to make a difference.

Operation Impact and the new INSPYRE grant programs are a great start but need to be expanded. I am asking NYS, to help us continue this important work by investing in our community. I would like you to consider a three year commitment of \$100,000/year to fund the "Seeding" component of Community Building and Organizing for organizations that have aged out of the Federal Weed & Seed program.

Included in this packet of information is additional back ground information on The HomeOwnership Center, Utica Weed & Seed and the Association of Block Coalitions.