

*Jonathan T. Weisberg*

# RENOVATING

## A HOUSING AUTHORITY

At the end of the 2001-02 academic year, YLS and the Housing Authority of the City of New Haven traded two valuable commodities. Longtime clinical professor Robert Solomon returned after a three-year leave spent as executive director of the housing authority. Stephen Yandle ended his seventeen years as an associate dean at YLS and succeeded Solomon at the housing authority.

*The design for one of the new Homes at Monterey, a public housing development in New Haven*



Public housing authorities, independent organizations funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, are the arms through which national housing policy reaches into individual communities and cities.

Public housing authorities are also regularly faced with massive projects and needs, while having limited budgets.

Robert Solomon, who directed the Housing Authority of the City of New Haven for three years, explains how the dearth of funds affects an agency responsible for housing thousands of people and managing huge properties. “There are three separate tensions going on,” explains Solomon. “Maintenance of existing housing, which is obviously critical for people who live there; modernization, which is something different, which is capital repairs of existing housing; and redevelopment, which includes demolition and rebuilding.” Each option is expensive, and often the housing authority has been forced to shortchange one area to fund another.

Even a project that is stunningly successful doesn’t unknot the budget bind. For instance the housing authority tore down the Elm Haven towers on Ashmun Street, just a few blocks from the Law School, and refashioned the area as the Homes at Monterey. The new development is a series of low-rise buildings, mostly well-built single-family homes and townhouses, spread over several blocks, with yards and gardens and cars parked in the driveways. The word “projects” seems less appropriate than “community.”

Monterey includes both subsidized and unsubsidized homes, bringing mixed income residents to the neighborhood. As one sign of its success, the market-rate rental units have a waiting list to get in. Poverty has been diluted, the neighborhood is safer. But Solomon points out that the project was expensive, while also reducing the number of affordable housing units in the area. “And to advocates of public housing, including me, that’s very hard to swallow. There are just not enough other building sites,” he says.

**The housing authority is in a newly invigorated position to face its fundamental challenge, though, thanks largely to the work that Solomon did as executive director. In June 2002, Solomon returned to YLS full time, and Stephen Yandle, an associate dean at YLS from 1985 to 2002, took over as interim executive director of the housing authority, to continue the progress.**

Yandle actually became involved with the housing authority first, when he was appointed a commissioner by New Haven Mayor John DeStefano in 1998. “When I came on the board,” Yandle says, “the housing authority was just in terri-

ble condition. The stock of housing was old and deteriorating and poorly maintained. There was a sense of malaise among the administration. And there was just no real prospect for things to turn around.” In addition, more than a million dollars was missing from one HUD grant, and the suspicion was that it had somehow been misappropriated.

As a result of failing scores on its annual review, the housing authority had been labeled a “troubled” agency by HUD and was placed in administrative receivership.

The Housing Authority of the City of New Haven, with around 130 employees, directly manages and runs about 3,000 housing units—making it the largest landlord in the city. In addition, the authority oversees 3,500 Section 8 vouchers, which give support to private landlords who provide housing for lower-income individuals. That means that the housing authority supervises one in six rental units in the city and touches the lives of a comparable proportion of the citizenry. When the agency failed to perform repairs, provide basic services, or deal with troublesome tenants, the daily life of the city was impacted.

Bob Solomon took over as executive director in 1999 and by recruiting new staff and motivating the people already working at HANH, he began to turn the agency around. In 1998, the agency received its lowest score ever in a review by HUD, 33.7—below the failing mark. Three years later, the score had risen to 72.7 and now it is at 80.

This turnaround was far off, though, when Solomon first took over. Problems ranged from inadequate responses to residents’ complaints to the faulty administrative systems that had allowed millions of dollars to disappear. “The first day I met with the maintenance workers,” Solomon recalls, “I told them that it was no secret that people around town had no confidence in them and wanted to privatize.” But Solomon was convinced that “When someone stands by a shovel all day and doesn’t do any work, to me that’s a management problem first.” He outlined a plan to assess the problems with supervision and retrain workers, before considering privatization. “When I finished that, I didn’t know what to expect, but I got applause.”

Solomon overhauled the senior administration of the housing authority, until only one top manager who was there when he started now remains.

Solomon also made an effort to travel to the two dozen or so HANH properties and meet with the residents. He says that

the message that he consistently heard was that the housing authority was not doing a good job of maintenance, pest control, and removing nuisance neighbors. One of the results was that the self-described public-housing advocate accelerated nuisance evictions from housing authority properties. And it was popular with residents. Says Solomon, “What [residents] want is what we all want. They want a safe place to live, they want it kept clean, they want to know that the roof’s not going to leak.”

Solomon set standards for both staff and residents at HANH. He describes his policy: “Any violence, you’re fired or you’re evicted, because responsibility goes two ways. Lack of integrity, you’re fired or you’re evicted.... When I got complaints about garbage lying all over the place, I agreed that we had to do a better job cleaning up the garbage, but I also started going through piles of garbage to find out who put it there.”

Solomon didn’t entirely shed his academic persona while working as an administrator (even when dealing with piles of garbage). He taught a course at YLS, “Housing Authority Clinic,” that brought students into HANH to help with various jobs and also to see how policy decisions affect individuals and a city. “They participated at a very high level in a lot of different things—plus they worked on policy papers,” says Solomon. “Two students worked on an extremely innovative program to give vouchers to supportive housing providers, so that would be a funding stream to enable the private, largely nonprofit market to provide supportive housing.”

Robert Hoo ’04 did what he calls “hands on” work while he was enrolled in the clinic. His role was primarily to work with the residents of the West Rock housing development to

determine their preferences, as the housing authority developed plans to renovate West Rock. The class also met in academic session once a week to cover issues like national trends in housing policy and the history of housing in New Haven. Hoo says, “The strength of the course for students is its ability to kind of combine those two things—to be able to look at complicated questions of policy and law and then be able to get some hands-on experience dealing with that.”

Sara Sternberg ’05 was another student in Solomon’s course. She actually took it for two years when she was an undergraduate at Yale College. She helped establish a resource center for housing authority residents and worked on founding a residents committee at one development that didn’t have one. She also worked on the redevelopment plans for West Rock.

Sternberg says that seeing how Solomon worked with residents and dealt with policy questions convinced her that she wanted to work in the area of city and housing policy. “I thought Bob was really good at helping people feel connected to the housing authority,” says Sternberg. “When I talked to residents, when I said Bob Solomon’s name they’d always sort of feel comforted that he was involved.... It was pretty amazing when he walked into a meeting, if he was late to a meeting, how much the dynamic of the meeting would change.”

Bob Solomon declines individual recognition for the housing authority’s successes in the last three years. “If the question is what I as an individual accomplished, I would say nothing. What we did accomplish together was get 130 people, or at least a large majority of them, on the same page, working toward a common goal, and doing what I kept telling them was the people’s work. At first they thought I was just a left-over hippie, but at the end, even if they laughed when they said it, they did start to believe it.”

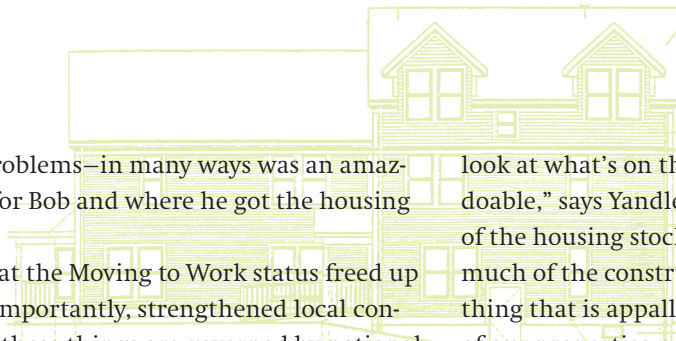
He also credits the backing of New Haven Mayor John DeStefano, as well as New Haven’s congresswoman, Rosa DeLauro, and Connecticut’s two senators. People throughout the community became involved, according to Solomon, because, “we started to show some signs of progress.... People had to see some sign of progress, but not much.”

A highlight of the housing authority’s resurgence came in 2001 when HUD granted the authority “Moving to Work” status. Moving to Work is a demonstration program designed to give local authorities more flexibility and control over their budgets. It frees them from certain regulations and thus requires responsible management. Amy Glassman ’04 was another student in Solomon’s course, but she had also worked at several housing authorities before coming to law school. “It was just amazing,” she says. “Awarding Moving to Work status to the New Haven Housing Authority—especially



Bob Solomon, left, handed off the director’s role at the New Haven Housing Authority to Steve Yandle, right.





in light of all its past problems—in many ways was an amazing vote of confidence for Bob and where he got the housing authority to.”

Solomon explains that the Moving to Work status freed up some funds and, most importantly, strengthened local control. “I think that all of these things are governed by national regulations and are similar to national trends but that all housing should be looked at as a local issue.... Sometimes the market works and sometimes the market doesn’t work, and it depends on housing vacancies and housing stock and all kinds of other things. So, it frustrates me that we try to determine at this super-national level what should happen locally.”

As Solomon returns to his position as a teacher and a supervising attorney, he says that he learned a lot from his stint at the housing authority. “I know much more about how various housing policies work on the street and the law of unintended consequences.” He provides the example of Section 8 vouchers, which were intended to give low-income people more housing choices. “It turns out to be, at least in our community, virtually a myth. In some ways you give them less choice because they can’t use it—as opposed to a dedicated housing unit that they can use.... To me, the real visionary sees a few more of the unintended consequences than someone else, because most of housing policy and most of social policy seem to have unintended consequences greater than the intended consequences.”

The biggest change for him, he says, has been going from a position where he made frequent final decisions to a more advisory role. There’s also a difference of perspective. “It is remarkable, how you move one seat down the table and everything looks different,” he says. “As a legal services lawyer, which I was, you represent one individual at a time, and it’s individual-rights based. When you do community work, as I was doing, it becomes group based, but you’re still looking at what a particular group wants in its neighborhood. When you’re the director of the housing authority, you really do have to look at development as a whole and the city as a whole.”

## Stephen Yandle became acting executive

director of the housing authority in June, and it is now his task to look at affordable housing for the city as a whole. Solomon will take a seat on the board as soon as one is available, completing the almost seamless switch between YLS and HANH.

Yandle says he has inherited a motivated and committed staff, including others with ties to YLS. Robin Golden ’98 is the deputy director, and Maureen Novak ’01 is a special assistant to the deputy director. “While we have a lot to do, when I

look at what’s on the plate now, it is manageable and it is doable,” says Yandle. The primary challenge remains the age of the housing stock in New Haven, and the low quality of much of the construction. “We everyday seem to find something that is appalling,” says Yandle. “And virtually every one of our properties needs significant attention.”

Yandle is putting in long days in his first few months, trying to learn all he can about the operations at the housing authority. He describes his knowledge base as a commissioner as “an inch deep,” and now he needs to cope with everything from multimillion dollar development deals to leaky sinks.

“It has been a really healthy experience for me to step outside of the four walls of Yale,” says Yandle. “Yale is a marvelous place and I cherished my time here, but it has given me an opportunity to see the richness that exists in the city of New Haven.” To compare running the housing authority to managing the finance and administration at YLS, he says, “The context is totally different.... But at the core, running things is running things and people are people. So those basic, administrative, day-to-day routines are quite familiar.”

One intractable problem that Yandle hopes to address in novel ways is the concentration of subsidized housing for the entire region in New Haven. While the percentage of subsidized housing units in the city is over thirty percent, the ratio is as low as two percent in some of the surrounding towns. This means that people seeking affordable housing are driven to New Haven from surrounding towns, and the city subsidizes housing and other social support services for these people. The problem is particularly difficult in Connecticut because there is no regional or county government. In fact, the New Haven Housing Authority is restricted from operating outside the city. Yandle plans to explore “ways in which there can be cooperative arrangements among the communities” to address the problem.

Yandle sees a lot of hope as well as challenge in running the authority. “A lot of money flows through housing authorities—I’m the first to argue not enough—but a lot of federal dollars are channeled through housing authorities and those are leveraged into state and local dollars.... We can be a powerful engine in this community.”

Solomon emphasizes the importance of public housing in its own right. “There is a reason why a dedicated public housing unit has a value—a value to society, not just to the person who gets to occupy it. There are populations that are always going to live in public housing. There are populations that need supportive housing. And those are the most vulnerable members of society, and we should and will be judged by how we treat our children and how we treat the most vulnerable members of society.” **Y**