

Public housing: Once desired, now a decades-long decline in CT

By [Justin Papp](#) 12:04 am EST, Sunday, March 3, 2019



Father Panik Village
F. P. Village
8-208
182
93%
P8
5mtr
Viel Flore

Photo: File Photo /Viorel Florescu

Father Panik Village, in Bridgeport, Conn., date unknown.

Mary Kingwood's home felt freshly settled.

The roomy first-floor apartment in a yellow house sits on a quiet street north of downtown — “up Norwalk,” as Kingwood called it. On a winter morning, sunlight flooded through windows and a sliding glass door leading to a small porch, warming the kitchen and den. A TV sat atop a stand, encircled by plastic chairs — placeholders as Kingwood waited for her furniture to be delivered — and cardboard boxes lined the walls.

Kingwood, 73, likes her porch and the peacefulness she's found since moving two weeks ago into the Wilton Avenue home, which took her many months and multiple apartment visits to find with a Section 8 voucher.

Her search was narrowed by her congenital heart disease and the oxygen tank she must maneuver around her living space. Per her doctor's orders, only single-story, two-bedroom homes — for an aide, or her children, to watch her after she's had an episode — would do.

Several places had potential, but one had no closet space and another, she liked, “but they wanted water and electric and heat. Section 8 don't want to pay for that,” Kingwood said.

The move was spurred by the razing and redeveloping of her 46-year home at Washington Village — the oldest housing project in Norwalk. The former federally funded project will be replaced by Soundview Landing, mixed-income development funded thanks to a \$30 million federal Choice Neighborhood Initiative Grant and the private developer Trinity Financial. The new complex will feature 136 federal public housing units (Washington Village also had 136), 67 workforce housing units and 70 market-rate units.

Kingwood was given a voucher to relocate during the construction and, upon its completion, will be offered a unit in the new development. But after more than four decades in a place, she is struggling to adjust. Soundview Landing looks to her like a hotel, cramped and without personal space, and Wilton Avenue can be lonely.

Washington Village had room for her kids to play and it was in that space that she and her family laid down deep roots.

“You’d go to your front door, or you’d go to your back door in the morning, and there’s usually somebody standing there waving good morning,” Kingwood said.

This particular morning on Wilton Avenue, only the empty yards of neighboring houses were visible from Kingwood’s porch.

‘Death by a thousand cuts’

The Norwalk redevelopment is part of a nationwide trend: Inadequate federal funding has forced local Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) to cultivate private partnerships to provide affordable housing. Results for tenants have been mixed.

In November, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [sent a directive](#) to PHAs, acknowledging that need had outpaced available funding and instructing them to “reposition” their housing stock.

“That repositioning means making it easier to demolish public housing and also making it easier for PHAs to voluntarily convert public housing to vouchers,” said Ed Gramlich, a senior adviser at the nonprofit National Low Income Housing Coalition, based in Washington, D.C. Vouchers are one of several types of federal assistance that provide aid to families, the disabled and the elderly to find housing. Other means of housing assistance include subsidized private development and state and federal public housing, the last of which has become increasingly less palatable to the government.

By October, the feds aim to eliminate 105,000 units nationwide. Statewide, federal public housing stock has already dropped by more than 3,000 since 2008, from 17,149 to 14,074 units.

This decrease has happened at varying rates in Connecticut municipalities.

Norwalk, bucking the trend, gained nine units since 1998. Bridgeport has lost just 23 federal public housing units since 2012, though by one estimate, the city's low-income housing stock has [dropped by as many as 1,000 units since the 1970s](#). New Haven lost more than 900 federal public housing units from 2002 to 2012. In Stamford, the average number of federally subsidized units through much of the 1990s was nearly 1,200. Today, there are 360.

“Once upon a time the federal government was very active in providing funding for new housing, not just keeping up existing, and that’s gone,” Stamford Land Use Bureau Chief Robin Stein said. “That’s where big dollars used to come for a lot of housing projects.”

Gramlich estimated that since 2010, public housing has been underfunded by roughly \$50 billion. During that same time, HUD has estimated a loss of between 10,000 and 15,000 public housing units a year. According to 2017 NLIHC estimates, there is a [shortage of 7.4 million](#) affordable extremely low-income (at or below the poverty guideline or 30 percent of area median income) rental homes. In Connecticut, there are only 36 affordable and available rental homes per 100 extremely low-income rental households. And with less funding, unresolved maintenance issues have piled up.

“With constant underfunding of the capital budget, basic repairs cannot be made,” Gramlich said. “When you starve the beast, the physical integrity of the units begins to crumble and then you’re forced to demolish and there’s no money to replace. It’s kind of a death by a thousand cuts.”

PHAs must find alternate solutions.

“What we’re hearing over and over again from HUD is that they’re unable to fund public housing at a level that would allow us to maintain it properly,” said Adam Bovilsky, executive director of the Norwalk Housing Authority. “One of the main reasons for conversions is in order to ensure that public housing doesn’t get dilapidated because of lack of funding.”

A dream takes seed

“A Dream Come True.”

So begins the second annual report from the Housing Authority of Bridgeport, dated 1940.

“Public housing has become a reality, through the working out successfully of one of the greatest cooperative enterprises in civic improvement that Bridgeport has ever seen,” the report gushes, touting the city’s first two public housing projects: the 1,251-unit Yellow Mill Village and the 516-unit Marina Village.

The projects were made possible, in part, thanks to the petitioning in Hartford for funds by Father Stephen Panik, first chairman of Bridgeport’s Housing Authority, and socialist Mayor Jasper McLevy, and the passage of the federal [Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937](#), which established the United States Housing Authority and allowed for the allocation of federal money to local housing agencies.

The aim was to clear substandard housing to which low-income people were relegated in the pre-war years — where conditions of crime and disease “constitute a menace to the health, safety, morals and welfare of the residents,” according to the Bridgeport report — and replace it with cleaner, safer, subsidized options.

“They were located in cities like Bridgeport and New Haven to support factory workers and improve their housing conditions, particularly in relation to strategic industries, like gun production,” said Alan Plattus, professor of architecture at Yale University.

In Connecticut and nationwide, the concept was embraced and projects were erected in large numbers.

Projects like Elm Haven in New Haven, Washington Village and Roodner Court in South Norwalk and Southfield Village and Vidal Court on Stamford's West Side were sold as beacons of hope for the city's neediest residents.

Upon its completion in 1941, Yellow Mill Village, later renamed Father Panik Village, was heralded by McLevy as "the biggest event in the history of Bridgeport."

A dream deferred

But by the mid 20th century, the dream had begun to wither, and projects were sources of the social ills they were ostensibly meant to cure.

The reason: "No jobs, or the disappearance of good, relatively high-paying, relatively low-skilled factory jobs," Plattus said.

"This is a familiar story. In the 19th and early 20th century, immigrants and people from rural areas in the South came to industrial cities. Without advanced degrees, or in some cases, without degrees at all, they could get a good factory job with benefits, join the union and build wealth," Plattus explained. "So a lot of the people who started out in public housing, typically would move to better housing eventually."

De-industrialization of cities also struck a heavy blow. Factories, which once sustained cities like Bridgeport and New Haven, shut down or relocated. Public housing became "relegated to the housing choice of last resort," Plattus said.

"When a lot of this public housing was built, starting in the 1930s and on through the 1940s and early 1950s, segregation was legal," Gramlich said.

In the years before the Civil Rights Act, properties were either intentionally placed in areas of low-income and racial concentration, or in some cases, were racially segregated by project building.

“That kind of racial dynamic was kind of baked into the system,” Gramlich said.

As conditions worsened in the '60s, '70s and '80s, public housing was [deemed a failed experiment](#) and [politicians squeezed funding](#). Projects became synonymous with drugs, crime and general depravity. Glaring examples of the system's failure (Father Panik and Elm Haven, among many) became cautionary tales.

Alternatives were sought, including the [HOPE VI Housing plan](#) in the 1990s, and more recently, the Obama-era [Rental Assistance Demonstration \(RAD\)](#) program and [loosened Section 18 demolition and disposition regulations](#). Each enables PHAs to demolish failed public housing and build replacements — often with the aid of a private partner — either with voucher or mixed-income units, that are seemingly meant to reduce the concentration of poverty and provide better living conditions and more opportunity for residents.

“I think that the old model of large public housing complexes is generally frowned upon at this point. I think there's general consensus among most policy makers that concentrating poverty is not healthy for families or cities,” Bovilsky said. “Where there are concentrations of poverty, there's normally less economic opportunity and outcomes for children tend to be reduced.”

Success, however, was varied.

The push for repositioning justified the further depletion of HUD funds and, in many cases, destroyed projects were not replaced with an equal number of low-income units. Often, displaced former residents of housing projects were denied re-entry to the new developments built where their homes once stood.

“What generally happened is there was no 1-for-1 replacement,” Gramlich said.

By 1994, Father Panik was completely razed and in 2017, Crescent Crossings, a mixed-income, partially federally-funded complex opened in its footprint. In recent years, Elm Haven, Southfield Village, Vidal Court, and most recently, Washington Village, have succumbed to the same fate, ushering in a new — and not necessarily improved — era of housing assistance.

“I think it changes the face of how we serve our low-income communities,” Bovilsky said. “It depends on how you do it. There’s no question of a greater need of affordable and deeply affordable housing, whatever the trends of public housing may be.”

Moving up, moving out?

Kingwood didn’t come to Washington Village by choice.

She was living with her children in an apartment on Flax Hill Road when, in 1970, the landlord sold to a developer. Kingwood, then a teacher’s aide, applied for public housing.

“I really didn’t want Washington Village. But they put you where they wanted,” Kingwood said.

Nevertheless, Kingwood adjusted. Her children, then her grandchildren, grew up in the project and, like Kingwood, forged bonds among the rows of brick apartments. Neighbors barbecued in the summer, played games in the courtyard and hosted seasonal clean-ups. Kingwood, along with the other single mothers that surrounded her apartment, formed an informal support group, often coming to each others’ aid in intangible ways.

“I never had to worry because normally the kids would go out and there was another mother out there watching,” Kingwood said. “They say it takes a village to raise a family. Washington Village was that village.”

There were, undoubtedly, problems at the project while Kingwood lived there. And there are, undoubtedly, positives to the privacy of her new apartment. But only one of the two places really feels like home.

“To ride by and see it torn down hurts. They’re not just tearing down a building,” Kingwood said, of Washington Village. “There were a lot of memories.”

Staff reporters Emlie Munson and Barry Lytton contributed to this story.

justin.papp@scni.com; @justinpapp1; 203-842-2586