



Sabrita, a client of Community Partners for Affordable Housing, stands in front of her first home.

Three Into One

How Forefront's Mission Sustainability Initiative is helping improve affordable housing in Chicago's suburbs

Collaboration Status: • Complete

Sustained Collaboration Type: • Merger

MSI Grant Types: • Exploration and Implementation

Technical Assistance Providers: • Mission + Strategy Consulting
• DeKind Computer Consultants
• Public Communications Inc.

Partners: • Affordable Housing Corporation of Lake County
• Community Partners for Affordable Housing
• Lake County Residential Development Corporation

In 2016, Rob Anthony of the Affordable Housing Corporation of Lake County and Mary Ellen Tamasy of Lake County Residential Development Corporation started chatting about an idea that had been floating around the affordable housing atmosphere for a few years.

The idea? Merge three prominent affordable housing nonprofits serving northern Cook and Lake Counties—or at least discuss collaborating on some level—to help minimize duplication and deliver the most effective services for the limited resources available.

Those conversations led to a complicated, delicate, and successful merger, one that offers an archetypal portrait of how Forefront, a nonprofit organization focused on building a vibrant social impact sector for the state of Illinois, is innovating in the nonprofit and philanthropic space.

“We’re just so happy with all the support and help from Forefront,” said Anthony, now president of Community Partners for Affordable Housing, the organization that once was three separate entities.

In October 2016, Forefront established the Mission Sustainability Initiative to help nonprofits who see the potential for long-term benefits in sustained collaborations, whether it’s a full merger, sharing office space or staff, or administrative or programmatic partnership. The MSI supports organizations’ moves toward partnerships in a confidential and productive way. The initiative also provides funding for collaborations, connects organizations with important pro bono services, and offers an array of toolkits, research, best practices, and workshops.

“The MSI is perfectly aligned with Forefront’s overall mission,” Forefront President and CEO Eric Weinheimer said. “Our primary goal is to make it easier for nonprofits to do their best work. The

MSI allows nonprofits the opportunity to thoughtfully consider partnerships and collaborations as a way to achieve their missions and maximize their impact for the communities they serve.”

Anthony said he’s unsure those early conversations would have gone much further without Forefront’s Mission Sustainability Initiative. “MSI provided the critical tools and early resources that we needed to get the ball rolling,” he said.

Exploring Collaboration

The three Lake County agencies—Affordable Housing Corporation of Lake County, Lake County Residential Development Corporation, and Community Partners for Affordable Housing—saw that merging had the potential to maximize their impact, Anthony recalled. More precisely, merging all three organizations into one would provide increased and more effective services to clients, create one place for housing services in Lake County, increase efficiency, and strengthen the agencies’

shared long-term missions.

In 2017, after about six months of discussions among leaders of all three agencies, Anthony reached out to MSI Director Genita C. Robinson. Among other topics, Robinson described what a potential merger process might look like, discussed consultants, and said funding might be available for a feasibility study.

The three organizations applied for funding. Forefront, through the MSI, provided nearly \$30,000 of the \$46,500 to conduct the feasibility study and facilitate the merger. The agencies contributed and also received a grant from the SeaChange-Lodestar Fund for Nonprofit Collaboration.

In addition, an MSI seminar connected the organizations with essential pro bono legal work from the Chicago Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Community Law Project. Without this support, legal services would have amounted to well over \$100,000 in paid work, Anthony said.

The feasibility study took about 6 months, and the more the three organizations aligned and collaborated, the stronger the case for a merger became. By late 2017, they had established a Joint Negotiation Committee of executive directors and two board members from each of the three agencies.

The Merger

In February 2018, all three boards approved merging the organizations. The next layer of the work process unfolded, including planning the actual implementation of the merger.

Community Partners for Affordable Housing (CPAH) leaders thought its organization had the widest brand awareness and wanted the new agency to be known by its name. The Affordable Housing Corporation of Lake County wanted to retain Anthony as president of the new organization, and Lake County Residential Development Corporation wanted its board chairwoman, Eve B. Lee, to serve in the same role for the new organization.



Rob Anthony, president of Community Partners for Affordable Housing, stands with the organization's leadership team and Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan.

The formal merger occurred on January 1, 2019. All three non-negotiables became part of the new Community Partners for Affordable Housing.

"It was really inspiring how all three

Despite the clear long-term benefits to the three partners that merged into Community Partners for Affordable Housing, Anthony would advise other organizations considering mergers that it was a heavy undertaking. He also said those organizations should plan on the first 12 months of the merger being "a rebuilding year."

of the boards negotiated," Anthony said. "There were no egos. People were really thoughtful every step of the way in making decisions for the right reasons." Those reasons, he said, were focused on providing more units of affordable housing to more people.

"I firmly believe that's happening and will continue," he said.



One of eight recently completed new affordable housing constructions done by Community Partners for Affordable Housing.

Impact and Lessons Learned

It was extremely hard work, maybe three times more work than Anthony expected. Creating and learning new systems, policies, practices and technologies led to a massive workload, as did staffs getting used to each other and their new work flow.

That unanticipated, heavy undertaking is one lesson learned that he would pass along to other organizations considering mergers.

Anthony already sees benefits from the merger in across-the-board efficiencies – accomplished without layoffs. Instead of clients being on multiple waiting lists for housing services, the new CPAH “has one number you can call and get help with any

type of housing-related need,” Anthony said.

He called it “a much larger continuum of services.” That continuum allows clients, with one phone call, to access services that include rental assistance, rental housing, property management, HUD-certified housing counseling, down payment assistance, owner-occupied rehabilitation, accessibility improvements, foreclosure counseling, financial counseling, community land trust programming, inclusionary housing administration, housing rehabilitation, project management, and new construction.

Concerns that the merger would dilute services to specific geographic areas turned out to be unfounded. In Highland Park, for example, where the original CPAH was started and headquartered, officials worried that a consolidation and move to Libertyville would lead to less attention to Highland Park’s affordable housing needs.

The exact opposite occurred, Anthony said. Now, Highland Park residents can get HUD-certified housing counseling and take advantage of a home accessibility program—new services from organizations that merged with the old CPAH.

Nine months into the merger, Anthony said the workload remains heavy but, “I think we all firmly believe that we did the right thing.” He called this year’s effort “an investment in the long-term structure of the organization. A lot of benefits will be seen in 2020 and beyond.”

Asked what more the MSI could have done to support the effort, Anthony paused.

“I don’t know,” he finally said. “They were just really great.” ■



To learn more about the Mission Sustainability Initiative, visit myforefront.org/msi/ or email Genita C. Robinson at grobinson@myforefront.org.