Defining Success in a Low-Income Housing Program: Why Does It Matter?

Katherine S. Nutter-McClintock
California State University, Long Beach
M.A. Applied Anthropology Candidate

Abstract:
While the number of families in poverty is increasing, few are accepted into low-income housing. Housing Now Incorporated is a low-income housing organization in Orange County, California that offers programs to help in areas of financial literacy, education, and health. Program definitions of success may play a part in shaping tenants’ immediate goals and overall perception of success. Tenant definitions of success, in turn, can redefine program definitions of success and their convergence towards sustainable outcomes for tenants, which includes working towards greater “self-sufficiency.”

Methods:
- My position as Family Mentor Coordinator and Recertification Specialist for Housing Now Incorporated allows me to have direct contact with all participants, observe staff and board meetings and program interactions.
- Participants include tenants, staff, board members and funders.
- Ethnographic study will utilize:
  - Participant observation
  - Semi-structured interviews
  - Focus groups
  - Case studies

Demographic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Housing Now Incorporated:
Housing Now Incorporated (HNI) is one of very few 501(c)3 non-profit organizations working to provide low-income, permanent housing for families earning approximately $10 an hour or less (30% of the median income). HNI has developed 225 units of housing scattered throughout Orange County, located in 9 different cities, which provide homes to 1,016 individuals (463 adults and 553 children). A majority of the tenants have either experienced or were on the verge of homelessness. They had either contacted HNI themselves or had been referred directly by homeless shelters or other social service organizations.

The above information depicts a growing disparity between the top and bottom incomes, producing further income inequality, and income levels at which those at the bottom have to climb to be able to afford rent and still save for a future. The above information depicts a growing disparity between the top and bottom incomes, producing further income inequality, and income levels at which those at the bottom have to climb to be able to afford rent and still save for a future.

At the intersection of possible tenant and program definitions of success, what does success entail and how does this lead to sustainable outcomes for tenants?

In Their Words: Tenants
- The initial sample of 10 female householders interviewed have an average of 2 children, 75% are working, 23% are enrolled in school, 60% are Latino and 40% are White.
- Although all tenants interviewed are enrolled in school now, the majority (75%) see getting an education as a way to a "professionally job" and out of poverty. As with HNI, there is an association here with higher education and higher earnings.
- All tenants interviewed see success as being able to support their families on their own (without assistance) and a way to provide their children more opportunities (college and extracurricular activities).

In Their Words: Staff
- The most frequently repeated expectation of tenants is that, while living in “affordable housing,” tenants should be continuously working towards improving their current position whether through achieving an education or a better job.
- Initial themes of successful tenants are those who have achieved an education, improved their financial stability, often through better paying jobs and savings, and ultimately, moved into market rate housing or bought a home.

Conclusions and Contradictions:
Emerging findings show that staff and tenant themes of success are of a similar nature in the areas of education, financial stability, and housing. However, there are differences in how these are further defined. Although the tenants stated they want to be able to provide their children with more educational opportunities, the majority also see their own education and subsequent employment opportunities as the primary ingredient needed for their family to achieve self-sufficiency. For staff, “getting an education” is discussed and promoted through program services as focusing more on the tenant’s children going on to college. Although higher education is definitely not discouraged for parents, this is not a primary focal point of the program. The service most valued by staff and major focus of the program is the college awareness project for high school students. Hence, career services are the second generation to build and achieve more, while the parents maintain the foundation of a stable home. This is viewed as a way to propel the family towards self-sufficiency and “break the cycle of poverty.”

Thus, further questions have arisen: Is this seen as a more feasible way to ensure that families move out of poverty? Is this a sign of ambivalence that low-income parents can achieve self-sufficiency with consideration towards structural and systemic realities?

Research continues on this project to further explore the intersection of definitions of success and convergence towards sustainable outcomes for tenants.

Contact Information: ksnmcc@cox.net