Annual Report

2017

The mission of BCRHA is to develop opportunities that will assist Berkshire County households in securing the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to achieve self-sufficiency and household stability.

Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority

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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Commissioners, Funders, and Community Partners:

Derrick A Bell said, “We live in a system that espouses merit, equality, and a level playing field, but exalts those with wealth, power and celebrity, however gained.” People all over our country, and more specifically the people we serve on a daily basis, continue to face significant economic challenges, which in large part are driven by the ongoing national dynamics alluded to in Mr. Bell’s quote. At the Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority (BCRHA), we are familiar with and ready to address these issues on at least a regional level. Even in what promises to be a difficult landscape, BCRHA remains committed to the organization’s social justice mission and core principles, which include:

* Developing housing-centric solutions to address community instability
* Promoting early intervention/prevention models of service delivery
* Ensuring services and programming are provided in an inclusive manner to a wide-range of households
* Utilizing holistic strategies, which focus on the underlying, causative issues
* Implementing collaborative , creative and dynamic programming to meet the continuously changing needs of the community

These principles have and will continue to assist us in our ongoing planning process and the related creation and implementation of programming and services. Planning for the future both on a concrete program development level as well as on an aspirational level provides an opportune time for an organization to take stock of its accomplishments, which in the case of BCRHA have been truly remarkable, especially for an agency this size.   Over the last year, BCRHA continued to expand programming to align with the community’s dynamic needs.  Program expansion included the implementation of a more robust foreclosure prevention program and financial literacy classes as well as an expanded financial assistance and assessment program. The agency continues to expand the highly successful Tenancy Preservation Program (TPP) by hiring an additional full-time case manager for the program to address the unique challenges related to youth and young adult housing instability and homelessness. Both the Mediation Center’s community and court-connected mediation programs continue to expand through increased grants received from the Attorney General’s Office (Face-To-Face Program) and from the Massachusetts Office of Public Collaboration, which have supported the growth of a more robust volunteer based community mediation program and the implementation of a Criminal Show Cause Mediation Program and a school based mediation program.  Some of the agency’s specific programmatic highlights over the last year include the following:

* *HSMP served over* ***1,900*** *Berkshire County households*
* *HSMP successfully mediated* ***497*** *claims filed for hearings in the Berkshire County District Courts or the Berkshire County Housing Court, involving over* ***950*** *disputants*
* *HSMP prevented* ***over 350*** *Berkshire County households from becoming homeless through the Program’s legal counseling, anti-foreclosure counseling, mediation, case management,  housing search, and financial assistance programs*
* *Legal and Educational Counseling was provided to* ***666*** *Berkshire County tenant households and* ***104*** *Rental Property/Homeowner households*

Our genuine commitment to the organization’s mission is perfectly captured by this quote from Pearl S. Buck, “To serve is beautiful, but only if it is done with a joy and a whole heart and free mind.” That is exactly the approach we take with every program we implement and every person we serve. It is my hope that you continue to support us and share our commitment and passion as we work to make a difference each and every day.

Thank you for your continued support.

All of the best,

Brad Gordon

Executive Director/Staff Attorney

BCRHA MISSION

*The mission of BCRHA is to develop opportunities that will assist Berkshire County households in securing the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to achieve self-sufficiency and household stability by:*

*Developing and implementing a continuum of services and programs that address the underlying causes of household instability and homelessness.*

*Assisting households to develop strategies to overcome barriers to self-sufficiency.*

*Collaborating with other human service providers, including grass roots organizations and faith-based organizations, to alleviate the causes and effects of household, housing, and community instability.*

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Date/Appointment Term Expires Appointed By

Richard Grillon 10/22/03 03/17/19 BRPC

Chairperson

Lisa Sloane 01/20/99 03/17/18 BRPC

Vice Chairperson

Andrew Hochberg 05/14/96 10/13/18 City of Pittsfield

Treasurer

Steve Como 6/26/08 10/13/20 City of Pittsfield

Jennifer Hohn 09/10/14 09/10/20 City of North Adams

James Pasquini 01/09/06 07/11/18 DHCD

BCRHA STAFF

Brad Gordon – Executive Director / Staff Attorney

Alyssa Capitanio – Director of Office Operations

Kristen Curtin – Director of Housing Services, Mediation Programming & SSVF

Kayla Wendling- Mediation Center Coordinator

Jim Hamilton – Foreclosure Counselor

Kate Alexander – Consumer Services/Mediator

Kyle Appleton – Mediator/Housing Counselor

Kim Borden – Program Coordinator, Tenancy Preservation Program

Marielle MacDonald – Tenancy Preservation Program Service Coordinator

Jeffrey Peck– Tenancy Preservation Program Service Coordinator

Tammi Dunham – Housing Search Case Manager

Jacob Hogue – Youth Resource Case Manager

Meghan Blauvelt – Housing Counselor/Mediator

HOUSING SERVICES AND MEDIATION PROGRAM

**Legal (Educational) Counseling for Housing and Related Matters**

*In 2017, 666 tenant households, 39 rental property owners and 65 distressed homeowners received legal counseling.*

Principles behind legal counseling

* Legal Counseling is the process of helping a client to make a decision. A part of this process, the person providing legal counseling will typically give their opinion about a matter, which will typically be based upon legal precedent (the law), economic, social, and other considerations.
* Informed Consent – Clients have the right of full access to information about other legal resources and social service options available to them before entering into the mediation process.
* Impartiality – All participants have the right to fair, open and equal treatment, free from bias, prejudice or conflict of interest.
* Confidentiality – All information will be kept within the Program, with any exceptions being agreed upon beforehand.

**Distinguishing legal counseling from legal representation (typically by an attorney)**

An attorney or legal representative has many obligations to his or her client. They must zealously defend the interests of the client and respond to the client’s concerns. They must communicate with the client, keeping the client informed about the status of the case and explain developments so that the client can make informed tactical decisions. They must abide by the client’s decisions regarding the objectives of the representation. With few exceptions an attorney or legal representative may not divulge client communications to outside parties without the client’s consent.

Legal/Educational Counseling is available to Berkshire County Tenants, Homeowners, and Rental Property Owners. Specific areas covered include but are not limited to the following:

* Security Deposit Law
* Last Month’s Rent Law
* Types of Tenancies
* Termination of Tenancies
* Evictions
* Fair Housing Laws
* Reasonable Accommodation Requirements
* State Sanitary Code Requirements
* Subsidized/Affordable Housing Regulations
* Foreclosure Laws Related to Rentals
* Quiet Enjoyment Laws
* Utilities Issues
* Lead Paint Law
* Housing Rehabilitation Resources
* Financial Assistance Programs
* Document Review

HOUSING SEARCH PROGRAM

*In 2017, 386 households received housing search information and referrals. In addition, 70 households received intensive housing search and 41 of those households were placed into permanent housing.*

Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority offers both light touch housing search assistance as well as a more intensive housing search program for households that qualify.

Some services that are offered include:

• Private Market Housing Resources

• Subsidized and Public Housing Resources

• Community Supports and Linkage

• Budgeting/Financial Planning/Financial Assistance

• Housing Search strategies

THE MEDIATION CENTER

*In 2017, 497 households received mediation services.*

*In 2017, The Mediation Center consisted of 4 staff mediators and 8 volunteer mediators.*

Mediation is a dispute resolution process in which a neutral third party assists the disputing parties to identify and discuss issues of mutual concern, explore solutions, and develop mutually acceptable settlements.

**Court-Connected Mediation (Conciliation)**  
Although BCRHA is approved to provide mediation and conciliation services in the Berkshire County District and Juvenile Courts as well as the Berkshire Superior Court, the agency primarily provides court-connected mediation and conciliation services in the Berkshire County District Courts. The specific types of cases or disputes that are appropriate for mediation include but are not limited to the following:

* Landlord/Tenant disputes, including eviction cases
* Small Claims disputes
* Neighbor disputes
* Property and real estate disputes
* Contract and other commercial disputes
* Consumer/Creditor disputes
* Trespass and Nuisance disputes
* Criminal Show Cause Cases, including bullying/cyber-bullying and harassment cases
* Other civil disputes

**Community Based Mediation**  
BCRHA is a community mediation program, providing both highly trained volunteer mediators and staff mediators to resolve a wide range of community based disputes, including but not limited to the following:

* Landlord/Tenant disputes, including eviction cases
* Neighbor/Neighborhood disputes
* Property and Real Estate disputes
* Contract and other Commercial disputes
* Trespass and Nuisance disputes
* School based disputes
* Elder and estate planning related disputes

TENANCY PRESERVATION PROGRAM

*In 2017, the Tenancy Preservation Program assisted over 140 households in preserving their tenancies.*

The Tenancy Preservation Program (TPP) is a homelessness prevention program. TPP works with individuals and families with disabilities that are facing eviction as a result of behaviors related to a disability (e.g. mental illness, developmental disabilities, substance abuse, and aging-related impairments). TPP functions as a neutral party to the landlord and tenant. In consultation with the Western Massachusetts Housing Court Division, TPP assists the property owner and tenant to determine whether the disability can be reasonably accommodated and the tenancy preserved. TPP case managers assess the reasons for the eviction, identify gaps in services, locate eligible services and develop a plan to implement those community based services to maintain the tenancy. TPP can monitor the engagement of services and the housing situation for a period of 18 months in some cases. TPP provides regular updates to all parties involved in the case (i.e. the Court, service providers, property owner, and tenant). Though not a housing search program, if the tenancy cannot be preserved, TPP coordinates the tenant’s transition to a more appropriate placement, preventing homelessness whenever possible. TPP also provides intensive housing search for disabled individuals that require assistance with filling out applications and/or locating appropriate housing.

TPP will provide transitional case management services to stabilize a housing issue until a permanent community based service provider can be identified and engage with the tenant. TPP will monitor the engagement to insure that it’s the best fit and the housing situation is stabilized long term. TPP will also assist clients to maximize their income and refer them to all eligible service that may enhance the tenant’s budget (e.g. fuel assistance, SNAP, Social Security, DTA benefits, etc.). TPP Service Coordinators are asked to regularly visit the homes of their clients to gain a better perspective on planning appropriate remedies for the housing instability.

BERKSHIRE CONSUMER SERVICES PROGRAM

*In 2017, the Berkshire Consumer Services Program assisted 111 households regarding consumer related matters.*

* Providing consumer education, information, counseling, resources, workshops, and more in areas as needed.
* Promoting early intervention and strategies that allow consumers to prevent or have disputes resolved in as timely a fashion as possible without having to resort to the court system and/or retaining attorneys.
* Providing a cost-free, accessible resource for Berkshire County consumers experiencing issues and/or disputes with for-profit businesses located in or outside of Berkshire County.
* Providing a cost-free, accessible resource for consumers residing outside of Massachusetts who need assistance in resolving a dispute with a Berkshire County located business.

The Berkshire Consumer Services Program (BCSP) is one of the 18 Local Consumer Programs (LCP) that are funded by and working in cooperation with the [Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office](http://www.mass.gov/ago/) so that Berkshire County residents and business can have access to local services and counselors/mediators who are familiar with the community.

In Berkshire County, the Berkshire Consumer Services Program is administered and implemented by Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority (BCRHA). BCRHA provides a continuum of programming that promotes household, housing, and community stability. That’s why the CSP fits so well within our agency.   The staff is trained to counsel, educate and inform consumers as well as businesses. We speak with many people who call in to ask questions about a variety of things, including their rights, how to get information on a consumer topic, and others. In addition, the primary staff person is a trained mediator and speaks with hundreds of consumers and businesses each year to help resolve disputes that have arisen out of any number of possible reasons.

The BCSP offers a free and voluntary mediation process, performed over the telephone, which seeks to resolve disputes – once a written complaint is filed – and hopefully reach a mutually agreeable and amicable resolution. If the staff is not able to resolve your particular complaint, all legal options are discussed and explained, including how to go about filing a claim in Small Claims Court. There may also be in appropriate cases the opportunity for face-to-face mediation (also available at no charge in the majority of cases through BCRHA), community legal aid, or a private attorney.

FORECLOSURE PREVENTION PROGRAM

*In 2017, the Foreclosure Prevention Program assisted 65 distressed households facing foreclosure.*

BCRHA offers Foreclosure Prevention Counseling to distressed Berkshire County Homeowners. Specific areas covered include but are not limited to the following:

* Federal and State Foreclosure Laws
* Forbearance Options
* Loan Modification Option
* Reinstatement and Payment Plans
* Sale and Short Sale Options
* Deed –In-Lieu of Foreclosure Option
* Budgeting/ Financial Literacy Classes
* Credit Restoration
* Financial Assistance/Soft Landing Options

SSVF

Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF)

In 2008, a provision was made in Section 604 of the Veterans Mental Health and Other Care Act authorizing the Department of Veterans Affairs to develop the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program. SSVF grants were awarded around the country to selected non-profits and consumer cooperatives that assist very low-income veteran families residing in or transitioning to permanent housing; Soldier On became one of the selected non-profit agencies. These funds have allowed Soldier On to further their mission and goals of providing stable, sustainable housing for veterans. The outreach program aims to assist veterans and their families before they become homeless in New York State, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, and western Massachusetts. Soldier On provides in-home case management, referral services and temporary financial assistance for housing to veterans who are homeless or facing homelessness. Soldier On strives to provide veterans with the services and support they need to carry on healthy, productive lives in homes of their own.

In 2014, The Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority partnered with Soldier On’s SSVF Program to provide housing support and guidance to Housing Specialists in the various states and regions where Soldier On provides SSVF programming: New Jersey, New York, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts.



DEWEY COURT

SHEFFIELD, MA

Dewey Courtis a state-sided public housing development located in Sheffield, MA. This development consists of 22 senior/handicap one-bedroom units and 8 family three-bedroom units.

This development has gone through a significant change over the last two years, with BCRHA entering into a formal agreement with the Great Barrington Housing Authority (GBHA) to provide property management and maintenance services for Dewey Court. With the Commonwealth implementing new regulatory and related policy reforms for state-aided public housing, emphasizing regionalization of some operations, the collaboration between BCRHA and GBHA is well timed, and this agreement has the opportunity to serve as a model for future regionalization initiatives in rural communities involving smaller housing authorities.

MOD-REHAB SECTION 8

This development consists of 41 Section 8 Single Room Occupancy units located in two connected buildings in the City of North Adams, Massachusetts. These buildings are currently owned, operated, and maintained by Ransford Properties, North Adams, MA. BCRHA’s sole responsibility is to administer the Section 8 subsidies for this development. BCRHA DOES NOT own or manage this site. The SRO development provides permanent affordable housing to formerly homeless individuals, many of whom would have no other affordable housing options in Berkshire County. One of the immediate future goals for this program is to secure funding for at least a part-time highly skilled case manager, who would be responsible for assisting the high percentage of disabled tenants that live at the SRO, which would provide greater long-term stability for these households.

FUNDERS

Dept. of Housing & Community Development

CHAPA

Franklin County Community Action

City of Pittsfield (CDBG)

Department of Housing & Urban Development

Massachusetts Bar Foundation

Emergency Solutions Grant

ServiceNet

Housing Counseling & Education Centers

Berkshire Housing Development Corp.

MassHousing

SoldierOn

Berkshire Life Foundation

Attorney General’s Office

Massachusetts Office of Public Collaboration

Dial/Self

WayFinders