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Fallen Leaves

The latest effort to revive Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood will test Obama's urban strategy.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PRESERVATION OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

By [Ronald Brownstein](#)

CHICAGO—The Woodlawn neighborhood on this city's South Side has been declining for so long that the latest federal effort to revitalize it is literally being built on the ruins of the last one.

In the late 1960s, the Housing and Urban Development Department provided loan guarantees to help the Woodlawn Organization, the tenacious local group founded by famed community organizer Saul Alinsky, develop a three-block-long housing project called the Grove Parc Plaza Apartments. Offering garden apartments (an alternative to the disastrous high-rise public housing symbolized by the now-demolished Robert Taylor Homes), Grove Parc was once considered the cutting edge of urban redevelopment. Now it is dreary and dilapidated, and HUD is tearing it down to try again.

Urban policy hasn't generated much public debate under President Obama. But the president, who worked as an Alinsky-style organizer just south of Woodlawn, has quietly put his own twist on the perennial challenge of reviving poor communities.

His strategy rests on the critique that, too often, Washington's antipoverty programs have failed because they tried to treat one problem facing a community—housing, crime, education—without addressing the others. The White House is prompting federal agencies and local groups to develop more-comprehensive responses that attempt to simultaneously address all of the interlocked challenges that plague low-income neighborhoods.

Under a White House-directed initiative, federal agencies dealing with housing, education, crime, and health care are seeking to align their efforts—and demanding that local jurisdictions do the same. "What is really revolutionary about this approach is that, for the first time, the federal government is bringing its full resources to bear in a coordinated way," says HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan, who is helping to lead the effort.

The push to revive Grove Parc and Woodlawn will sternly test that vision. The complex deteriorated so much under a succession of private managers (including one company run by Valerie Jarrett, now a senior White House adviser) that HUD considered closing it and relocating its residents. Instead, tenants persuaded a Boston-based nonprofit called Preservation of Affordable Housing to take over in 2008. Although the group operates in nine states, Grove Parc remains "the most challenging project we do," says the group's young project manager, Thacher Tiffany.

That's partly because the problems in Woodlawn, located just south of the gothic and elegant University of Chicago, are so entrenched. After World War II, the neighborhood convulsed through the classic white flight as African-American migrants from the South succeeded middle-class white families. Despite a vibrant tradition of neighborhood engagement, Woodlawn suffers from the full catalog of urban ills. During one workday last week, clusters of young men drifted through the streets as aimlessly as the first fallen leaves of autumn. Only a battered handful of dollar stores and nail salons survive along the faded commercial strip under the old elevated train tracks that run adjacent to Grove Parc. Just one-third of the complex's residents are employed.

In August, HUD provided a \$30.5 million grant to Preservation of Affordable Housing, a constellation of other neighborhood groups, and the city of Chicago to confront all of these problems. The money came under a "Choice Neighborhoods Initiative" that promotes comprehensive strategies for community revitalization. Under the grant, the management group and its partners committed to raze and replace the 504 units in Grove Parc with almost 1,000 new apartments for low-income and working families; to build a resource center that provides "one-stop shopping" for job-training and other services; to formulate new anticrime strategies; and to launch enhanced reform efforts in local schools. A similar "Promise Neighborhood" grant from the Education Department will boost this last endeavor, which includes expanded after-school programs and teacher mentoring.

This panoramic approach captures the goals of Obama's urban strategy. It integrates policy across a broad range of challenges, concentrates federal resources, and demands that communities receiving aid build broad coalitions and leverage local investment. "It's a much more comprehensive and holistic approach," Donovan insists.

Preservation of Affordable Housing has already demolished 126 units, and this week it began moving the first residents into 67 attractive new ones in vibrantly colored buildings constructed near the El. The tenants will include not only poor families receiving federal housing aid but also working families drawn to the spacious apartments offered at reasonable rents. Felicia Dawson, the project's energetic director of community affairs, says that those families in turn should attract merchants to the crumbling commercial strip.

If commitment ensured success, Woodlawn's revival would be a *fait accompli*; the HUD grant builds on years of extraordinary local effort and planning. But the headwinds facing the community remain powerful—especially amid the worst economic downturn since the Depression. Bright and airy, the sleek new buildings now welcoming their first families physically embody the promise of renewal. But years ago, so too did the tattered apartments that now await the wrecking ball.