

Leadership Academy Boosts Grassroots Effectiveness

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MUTUAL HOUSING ASSOCIATION OF GREATER HARTFORD

Developing leadership skills changes lives and strengthens communities.

In 2009, the Mutual Housing Association of Greater Hartford (MHAGH) recognized that building stable communities by including residents as equal partners in housing governance and leadership called for a more intensive approach to developing experienced resident leaders.¹ Founded in 1988, MHAGH originally focused its resident-participation efforts on maintenance and operations. Participation was required under the Mutual Housing Agreement, but changes in landlord-tenant laws over the years made enforcement next to impossible.

MHAGH came to the realization that instead of mandating activities, it would be more productive to recruit residents who already had an interest in community building and to offer leadership programs on a voluntary basis. Although clean-up days and landscaping activities are still important community-building tools, MHAGH has been impressed with how its Mutual Housing Leadership Academy (MHLA) empowers residents to truly govern. Another revelation: developing resident leaders is a catalyst for their personal growth and for unanticipated community impact.

The Tools for Empowerment

The MHLA is a 12-week training program in which residents participate in workshops and panel discussions based on the NeighborWorks America curriculum for training emerging leaders. The program, facilitated by MHAGH's resident-initiatives coordinator, brings in guest speakers for many of the classes. Topics include team building, leaders in real life, mapping the community's assets, project planning, public speaking, and recruiting and retaining new leaders. The fundamental skills are critical for any leader and can be used at work, home, school, and in the larger community.

During the course of the program, participants form teams and utilize their newly learned skills to create and implement a team project that is executed during the 12 weeks. Team projects must address a community need and should include strategic partnerships whenever possible. In addition to the opportunity to do a community project and attend classes, participants get to meet one on one with the facilitator to set professional-development or personal goals.

At the end of the 12 weeks, a public graduation ceremony affords academy participants a chance to showcase their projects and discuss the insights and skills they have gained.

But MHAGH's relationship with the students does not end with graduation. Academy graduates can pursue their community interests by applying for a \$1,000 grant from MHAGH to seed new efforts. These grants pay for materials or equipment needed for a larger individual or community project. The graduate must raise any additional funds or volunteer his or her labor to complete the project.

Additionally, some graduates decided to form the Leadership Alumni Association as a networking resource to sustain the enthusiasm and the community connections and to serve as a forum for exchanging ideas with like-minded, civically engaged people.

Although the MHLA was originally designed for Mutual Housing residents alone, it is now open to any resident of Greater Hartford. Currently, 20 percent of program graduates are MHAGH residents. The other 80 percent come from around the city. MHAGH does not require team projects that directly benefit MHAGH, and thus there is considerable freedom for people to pursue their personal community passion.

The first academy had only four participants. Now each one averages 15–20 participants. And there's a waiting list. The number is limited in order to foster meaningful discussions and to build bonds among participants. There is no cost, but there are high expectations, and participants must attend at least 10 of the 12 sessions in order to graduate.

Benefits

MHAGH is now in the process of an extensive program evaluation, conducting surveys and interviews with graduates, and attempting to catalog the many projects and extended benefits of the program. In the four years since its inception, the MHLA has graduated more than 100 leaders, and those leaders have completed dozens of community projects benefiting hundreds of Greater Hartford residents. Projects have included neighborhood family fun days, health fairs, improving parental involvement in schools, presentations on childhood obesity, and cultural-diversity initiatives. Some of the activities have extended well beyond the initial project and have continued for years. Meanwhile, five of the 11 members of MHAGH's board of directors are now graduates of the MHLA, bringing a new level of resident insight to governance.

"The leadership training helped me discover skills I thought I did not possess and enhanced the skills I had. It also broadens my views and approach on how I think about things. The leadership training gave me tools to be confident in my endeavors."

—Program Participant, Class of 2012

Such results on their own would be enough to deem the program a success. However, in the long term, certain unexpected consequences may turn out to be the most impactful. When asked how the MHLA has benefited their lives, almost all participants reported that they had gained confidence in taking on projects and working

as part of a team. Participating in a group project prepares people to work in a collaborative environment, which is important both for civic engagement and in the workplace. Several graduates noted they had secured better jobs. One graduate is now employed with Public Allies, an AmeriCorps program, and is helping to bring affordable housing to New York's Hell's Kitchen. Another has joined Toastmasters and has been appointed to the Governor's Coalition for Youth with Disabilities.

MHLA participants range in age from 16 to 80 and are incredibly diverse. There are those whose goal is to finish high school and those who have graduated from law school. We have had third-generation politicians and those who have never registered to vote. And we have helped people coming out of transitional housing as well as established homeowners. That diversity has been a plus as graduates report that they have gained a new respect for different ideas and an understanding that everyone has something of value to contribute.

Graduates also say they feel more connection to their community. Often people have a desire to make changes in their lives and in their communities but don't know where to start. The academy provides a safe learning environment to pursue such dreams. Because it is only 12 weeks, participants are encouraged to take on community projects that are manageable and have a reasonable chance of success. Success gives participants the confidence to try something different and to connect with the larger community later on.

Many graduates report that the one-on-one process of goal setting helped them to prioritize and focus. Some of the most powerful examples of participants who have set life goals have been those who have gone on to pursue two-year college degrees. MHLA partnered with Goodwin College on the school's "Golden Ticket" program. Interested academy graduates were given the opportunity to complete a two-year college degree at no cost. Three MHLA graduates are nearing completion of their associate's degrees and have seen the trajectory of their lives change dramatically. These are single mothers who had either missed the opportunity or had not succeeded in college as younger adults. They report that the skills they developed in the MHLA helped them concentrate on where they wanted to take their lives.

There have been other unexpected benefits. Through the Leadership Academy Alumni Association, MHAGH now has a ready pool of volunteers. The nonprofit has only one resident-initiatives coordinator and benefits greatly from volunteers, who help with 50-plus events at its 11 housing developments annually. Last year alone, MHLA graduates donated more than 500 volunteer hours to MHAGH.

Partnerships

The academy naturally lends itself to partnerships, and MHAGH has forged strong ones. For example, the Hartford Public Library provides training space at no cost. FoodShare, the local food bank, has provided grant funds for postgraduate community projects, and in return, MHAGH provides leadership training to FoodShare staff. The City of Hartford and the mayor's office have hosted tours for participants and have shared their insights on the workings of government.

During graduation, a three-person panel provides feedback to each participant presenting a community project and offers observations about the work and suggestions on presentation style. The panel members are chosen from a variety of Hartford organizations, including Hartford Insurance, the YMCA, Covenant Prep, and the University of Connecticut Law School. Panel participants have all commented on how much they have learned from the graduates.



Photo Terry Sparks

Terry Sparks's Mutual Housing Leadership Academy grant purchased uniforms and a banner for Hartford's Proud Drum, Drill, & Dance Society for the Prevention of Violence.

MHAGH has spent more than 25 years building affordable housing. But clearly bricks and mortar are only part of the solution to improving our communities. The Mutual Housing Leadership Academy capitalizes on the eagerness of community members to tackle their own problems. To quote anthropologist Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

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Endnote

¹ MHAGH brings residents, corporations, and community organizations together to provide quality affordable housing for Greater Hartford.

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