

HEALTHY OUTCOMES >



Thoughtful Design, Management, and Resident Involvement, **PRODUCES HEALTHY OUTCOMES**



BY ANNETTA JENKINS



BY KEN STAPLETON

As a key component of healthy outcomes in and around affordable housing, real and perceived safety from crime have significant impacts on active lifestyles, mental health, and access to affordable care as well as healthier foods. The way we locate, build, manage, and communicate about affordable housing and safety can help maximize healthy outcomes for both our residents and the larger community. We need to understand the relationships among fear of crime, social isolation, stress, depression, place avoidance, walking, mobility after dark, chronic diseases and more.

Fear of crime creates excessive stress and leads to place avoidance behaviors, often severely limiting resident's own movements and the movements of family members. For example,

a mother with high levels of fear will not let her children walk to school or play outside or in the nearby park. This often leads to greater social isolation, fewer trips to buy healthy foods, less physical activity, depression, limited trips to get health care, and even more stress and fear – particularly after dark. It can become a vicious downward spiral. Of course this stress, poor eating, and limited activity often lead to much higher rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other serious negative health outcomes. Unfortunately, low-income minorities and women suffer most from this kind of situation.

HOW CAN AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROFESSIONALS HELP ACHIEVE HEALTHY OUTCOMES FOR HOUSEHOLDS WITH LIMITED INCOMES WHERE FEAR OF CRIME IS CONSTANTLY MAKING THINGS WORSE?

FIRST, we start by **communicating strategically**

about others' fears of affordable housing and locating developments in neighborhoods with better real and perceived safety. This requires a sophisticated and highly intentional approach using positive and indirect messaging as well as careful public relations strategies. To be successful, there must be safe and successful developments to share.

SECOND, we need to take a very intentional approach to designing in safety both on and off the housing site. This includes design details to enhance access management, natural surveillance, territoriality, informal social interaction, lighting, surveillance technology, and much, much more. Balconies, flower beds, dog parks, community gardens, transit stop locations, and a thousand other design details must become part of the real and perceived safety strategy. This includes pedestrian pathways to/from our site to transit stops, medical offices, grocery stores, schools, parks, and other health-related facilities. Importantly, affordable housing professionals must educate themselves about how to accomplish this, because most design teams have very limited expertise in this area. One useful technique is to always ask for night-time renderings of your project – with explanations about the lighting standards used.

THIRD, we must **integrate safety into every aspect of managing our properties**. Examples include: our programs for youth; family events after dark; maintenance standards for lighting, landscaping, graffiti, fencing, trash removal, and even pavement striping; and of course tenant selection. Fundamentally, safety must be every employee's top priority. In doing so, we will also lower operating expenses – and sometimes rents.



Finally, we must **involve our tenants** in creating their own safety. Given the common “anti-snitch” dynamics of many low-income communities (driven by fear of retribution), traditional block watch programs will have very limited impact. Efforts such as asking tenants to conduct community safety audits, providing safe ways for neighbors to get to know each other, encouraging tenants to plant and maintain flowers or vegetables in designated areas, recruiting tenants to remove litter and trash, and providing anonymous ways for tenants to share concerns (and of course addressing them), will help create a culture of care and control that has been shown to significantly

improve both real and perceived safety – as well as social cohesion and mental health.

With safety improved and people showing care for each other, your tenants will: become more physically active; participate in community gardens more happily;

reduce their isolation, depression and mental stress; rely less on expensive private cars for mobility – getting unintentional exercise as they walk more; make greater use of parks and open spaces; and live healthier, happier lives – in communities that are equally healthy. **HNN**

The authors will be facilitating a discussion at the CRA Caucus on September 8th at the Florida Housing Coalition Conference - please join us!

Annetta Jenkins is the Director of Neighborhood Services for the Riviera Beach CRA and currently serves on Palm Beach County's Housing Leadership Council. She is a seasoned community and economic development professional, with more than 27 years of national, statewide and local experience.

Ken Stapleton is President of Ken Stapleton & Associates and provides program strategy and project management services related to a variety of public and private clients. With over 30 years of urban revitalization and economic development experience, Ken is also the President and CEO of the Safedesign™ Institute.