

New York Nonprofit Press

Agency Of The Month

WHEDco: Women's Housing and Economic Development Corp. Building a Better Bronx

May 1, 2011



Housing is essential, but it is not enough. That was one of two significant realizations which came to Nancy Biberman in 1991 and which have served as the founding principles for WHEDco – the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation.

As Director of Housing for Catholic Charities, Biberman had already overseen the development of 23 building with 722 apartment units. "We and several other nonprofits had collectively created thousands of new apartments in the Bronx," she explains. "But nobody had paid any attention at all to the neighborhoods. There were no shops, none of the basic services you take for granted – health clinics, dry cleaners, after school programs -- absolutely nothing."

The second realization was that 80 percent of the heads of households in this newly developed housing were women – mostly women with children. "What were these people going to do?" Biberman asked herself. They were going to need essential services for their young families, including schools and child care. They were also going to need opportunities to work and earn a living.

"I started thinking that there might be an opportunity to create an organization with a broader mission," says Biberman, something that would look beyond housing and also focus on economic and community development needs.

Devon Russell

Nancy Biberman

In the meantime, Biberman found herself staring at the hulking remains of the old Morrisania Hospital at

168th Street near Grand Concourse, a massive complex covering one full city block and dominated by the ten-story main building plus separate dorm buildings for nurses and other utility buildings. “It was described as the last significant abandoned structure in the Bronx,” says Biberman. “It was a major eyesore, a drug den for crack addicts, a really terrible blight on the neighborhood.

“However,” she continues, “there was a lot you could do with it.”

Biberman began meeting with a group of local women from the community who were pressing for a new public school and other programming. They began to merge their visions and one of the results was WHEDco.



“We put together a concept paper and began talking to funders,” says Biberman. The plan was to create both low-income affordable housing and program space for services the community needed desperately – primary health care, child care, social services, and economic development activities. “We got a uniformly positive response.”

The city deeded WHEDco the building for a dollar and Biberman put together \$26 million in funding through a maze of City, State, Federal and private funding sources, including the Homeless Housing Assistance Program (HHAP), Low Income Housing

Tax Credits and a grant from the Urban Development Corporation. The project was far from easy. “Some people told us the building was cursed and that we were crazy to get involved with it,” says Biberman.

The roof garden at WHEDco’s Intervale Green is just one example of the agency’s strong commitment to a making a “green” and healthy lifestyle possible for residents of the Bronx.

Nevertheless, in 1997, after several years of planning, fundraising and negotiations, plus 18 months of actual renovations, WHEDco opened Urban Horizons. The project featured both 132 units of low-income, rent stabilized housing, and the Urban Horizons Economic Development Center. The goal was to provide both affordable places for people to live and the services they would need once they were there. The design featured a childcare center, health care facility and program space for a range of social services. It also housed a full-scale commercial kitchen for use as an economic development incubator.

The agency now serves 104 children in the Head Start program. “We are particularly proud of the Head Start program,” says Biberman. “It is nationally accredited and was recently named one of the seven highest performing early childhood programs out of 2,200 providers in New York State by Root Cause, a nonprofit research firm. At WHEDco, we have seen how high-quality early childhood education helps children and families prepare for success. 100% of children who go through our early childhood education programs are school-ready. They are able to think creatively, communicate, analyze age-appropriate information and most of all, they are confident and happy. Parents are also better informed about how to navigate the public school system and be active partners in their children’s education.”

Child Care Micro-Enterprise Development

WHEDco's Family Support Services offers a wide variety of programs and services, such as this Family Literacy class, for community members.

The need for child care has been a constant theme from WHEDco's very first days. Without it, low income mothers of young children, often single parents, are effectively barred from finding and maintaining employment.



Yet, the community's need for child care also created an opportunity for WHEDco in its efforts to help neighborhood women develop and run their own businesses.

"The things we saw most were that women who weren't able to work in Manhattan were either taking care of children in their homes or they were cooking and selling foods and cakes," says Biberman. "Now these are legitimate activities, but they were part of the underground economy, strictly cash businesses." WHEDco was determined to

give these women the support they needed to come out of the shadows and run their businesses as businesses – fully licensed and totally legitimate.

The commercial kitchen at Urban Horizons provides everything local food service entrepreneurs need to build their own businesses.

Soon after opening Urban Horizons, WHEDco joined forces with the Athena Project. Headed by Diana Perez, the Athena Project was offering training for women working as informal caregivers in their own homes, and helping them to get licensed so they could generate more revenue and increase their own incomes. Before long, the Athena Project merged into WHEDco, and Perez now serves as the agency's Director of Childcare Services.

"Babysitting is a job. Childcare is a career." That's the motto of WHEDco's Childcare Improvement Project (CIP). Over the years, WHEDco has assisted over 1,000 women – as well as some men – to become licensed by the Department of Health as family day care providers. In the process, it has built its own family day care network with 184 providers serving over 3,800 children every day.

WHEDco's youth development programs serve approximately 1,000 kids -- 700 during school-year programming and an additional 300 in a summer arts day camp.

"We were the ones who really started the concept of microenterprise development in childcare," says Perez. "That's what sparked us to develop a solid network development program where we could provide technical assistance and integrate all the business concepts a person needed to make a viable living doing this work. Individuals get training so they can become high-quality caregivers and understand the importance of early childhood education and nutrition.



The importance of this effort for the individual providers – and for the community as a whole – cannot be

overestimated. “They are generating \$9.3 million in revenues annually,” says Biberman. “They employ staff. In 2009 providers in the Home-based Childcare Microenterprise Network earned \$35,000 per year on average, higher than 60% of Bronx workers. We’ve been watching this for over a decade, seeing the numbers of providers and kids in day care grow year after year.”

WHEDco provides a variety of supports for the family day care providers in its network. It offers training as well as quality assurance through home visits for parents of children in care. The agency also assists providers in meal planning and participation in the Child and Adult Food Program (CAFP), a federal program which offers reimbursement for some food costs, thereby lowering the providers’ operating expenses. “Under the regulations, they are often eligible to use CAFD to help feed their own families,” says Biberman. “That is another important way we can subsidize those businesses.”

Formalizing Informal Care

Based on its long experience in working with family child care providers, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services tapped WHEDco in 2008 to handle enrollment for informal child care providers receiving payments through government subsidy programs. Under current policies, public assistance recipients must participate in employment or work-related activities in order to remain eligible for benefits. Consequently, women with young children are required to obtain childcare, which is often provided on an informal (i.e. non-licensed) basis either by relatives or neighbors who are in turn reimbursed by the City. The informal childcare system is huge. More than three-quarters of all TANF-funded childcare subsidy payments – an estimated 71% – go to these informal care providers.

Before launching the new enrollment process, caretakers were simply required to sign an attestation form stating that they were in compliance with a variety of health and safety regulations. Now, WHEDco actually vets the attestation, doing a series of criminal background checks and searches of child abuse and sex offender databases. Agency staff do site visits on a 20% random sample of newly enrolled caretakers – as well as any where questions or complaints surface. WHEDco’s enrollment screening has helped to protect an estimated 5,500 children from unsafe childcare conditions. While approving 76% of applicants, the agency has terminated 12% and negotiated voluntary closures of a similar percentage. The agency estimates that it has saved New York State \$1.8 million annually by eliminating fraudulent claims for payment.



WHEDco began the new program in the Bronx before being selected to roll it out on a citywide basis. The size and scope of the assignment is enormous. WHEDco has already enrolled more than 34,000 informal caretakers. And, they are all required to be reenrolled annually. The project now has over 90 WHEDco staff working at 22 HRA Job Centers and other sites throughout the City.

In addition to more than doubling the agency’s budget over a two-year period, the OCFS contract is allowing WHEDco to carry its message that “Childcare is a Career” to an extraordinarily large audience of women who have already chosen “Babysitting” as a job.

“That is the big goal here,” says Perez. “Last quarter we trained 100 women. Our goal is to train 200 women per year as we roll out.”

Unfortunately, WHEDco is still reliant on philanthropic, rather than government, funding for its Childcare

Improvement Project licensing support and training efforts. Perez is grateful for the support. “We have been lucky,” she says. “This department has had sustainable funding for a long time from a number of foundations.”

Food Service

The other naturally occurring business opportunity for many neighborhood women was to stay home and cook – then sell their food or baked goods on an informal basis.

“We also thought there were real possibilities in creating a licensed commercial kitchen,” explains Bieberman. “There were so many women interested in cooking, but they were working out of their own apartments. That is a real impediment. You can’t legally sell your products unless you have a licensed commercial kitchen and a food handler certificate.”

While the kitchen was ready to go on day one, the program hasn’t always run smoothly.

“The kitchen probably has had the rockiest history of all the things we have done,” says Bieberman. “We started it as an incubator for small businesses, and then decided we had a significant opportunity to create a vocational training program for the food and hospitality industry. We thought it would be a good idea to create it in the context a functioning catering company. It was ambitious. We had a high-quality catering for a short period of time. We had a lot of customers throughout the city, a truck making deliveries, a professional staff that included high-end chefs who were very committed.

“We graduated some amazing students,” Bieberman continues. “It was enough to bring you to tears; for many of these people, it was the first time that they had ever graduated from anything in their lives.” The problem, however, was that the program was struggling as a business. “It had an overhead which was greater than required to run a catering business,” explains Bieberman. “It was staffed to meet the needs of the trainees; otherwise you wouldn’t need all the staff.”

WHEDco shut down the operation soon after 9/11 as the economy took a hit, making the program even more difficult to run.

Now, the kitchen is back as a small business incubator, offering fully-licensed facilities to a small but growing cadre of food service entrepreneurs. Among the businesses making use of the 4,000-sq. ft. facility are Rasol Empanadas, Miniature Pastries and a host of local caterers. Nia Froome, who just won the 2010 Oppenheimer Funds/NFTE National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge, has brought her Mama Nia’s Vegan Bakery to the kitchen. In all, the kitchen’s clients probably employ a total of 50 or more staff, says Kitchen Manager, Marcus Gotay.

“We are hoping to ramp up and begin operating the kitchen on a 24/7 basis,” says Vice President/CFO Tom Gultinan. “We feel the demand is there.” Already, Gultinan says, the kitchen is breaking even.

Youth Development

In 1997, WHEDco added a youth development program to its continuum of critical community services. “We started with a summer camp serving about 50 kids from Urban Horizons and the surrounding community,” says Davon Russell, who joined WHEDco to develop that program and now serves as Executive Vice President.

Since that point, the agency’s youth programming has grown substantially. “We serve about 1,000 kids – approximately 700 during school-year programming and an additional 300 in our summer arts day camp,” says Russell.

WHEDco is the community partner for the Rafael Hernandez Dual Language Magnet School (PS/MS218) which was opened near and almost simultaneously with Urban Horizons. The agency operates a DYCD-funded Out-of School Time (OST) program, as well as a variety of other specialized activities. Project STEP is designed to help middle school students develop their leadership skills through the

development of community service learning projects.

The JAM (Just Ask Me) Program empowers teens to teach sex education to their peers. “This program is completely led by young people,” says Russell. “It was developed in response to a need expressed by young people in our afterschool programs, which was that their public schools did not teach sex education.”

WHEDco’s youth development programs have developed strong support from a number of funding sources, including the Madison Square Garden’s Garden of Dreams Foundation. “We are able to take advantage of the Garden’s offerings, everything from the Knicks to the Rockettes,” says Russell. “We just had an NBA Green Week event in which Knicks players came and planted flowers with kids in the program.” Through this relationship, several high school freshmen in WHEDco’s teen program are participating in a redesign and transformation of the Garden itself. “It is a four-year project. They will learn about the planning process and participate in the rebuilding. They will get a scholarship to college afterwards,” says Russell. “The experience will be invaluable to them.”

On April 5th, Madison Square Garden’s Garden of Dreams Foundation helped WHEDco to open its new Leadership Center for youth, complete with a gleaming, high tech computer lab and teen lounge for students of all ages to gather, collaborate on projects, and learn essential skills for a successful future. Turning out for the ribbon cutting were NY Knicks alumnus John Starks, NY Rangers alumnus Ron Duguay, as well as local elected officials.

Intervale Green

In 2005, WHEDco began its second major housing development project – and added a distinctly “green” focus to all of its efforts. Opened in 2009 in the Crotona section of the Bronx, Intervale Green, provides 128 units of affordable housing, 39 of which were set aside for families coming out of the homeless shelter system.

Intervale Green also holds the distinction of having won national recognition in 2009 with the Charles L. Edson Tax Credit Excellence Award for being largest affordable multi-family ENERGY STAR certified building in the country. The building features 85%-efficient boilers and hot water heaters; low flow faucets and showerheads; highly energy-efficient windows; non-toxic building materials and nearly half an acre of green space, including landscaped street trees and green roofs.

WHEDco’s “Green” orientation, however, has now expanded substantially – both geographically and philosophically. The agency is in the process of completing an energy retrofit of Urban Horizons, no small task for a building of that size, age and history. “We wanted to demonstrate that this was possible,” says Biberman. The net result is estimated to be \$60,000 in energy savings annually for residents, and significantly more for WHEDco, as the building’s owner.

WHEDco also sees “Green” as something more than building design and energy efficiency. “It’s about health and fitness, lifestyle and nutrition,” says Biberman. Intervale Green now hosts nutrition and cooking clubs as well as an urban garden where residents are able to harvest fresh vegetables.

Growing Green Carts

The agency’s new Green Cart initiative is an interesting hybrid of this newer focus on healthy living and its long standing interest in micro-enterprise economic development.

“There are parts of the Bronx where you can walk for miles without being able to buy a tomato,” says Khushbu Srivastava, Director of Marketing and Communications. Green Carts are one increasingly popular vehicle for bringing fresh fruits and vegetables into these “food deserts” throughout the City. However, obtaining the necessary official permits to run a Green Cart is a daunting process.

“There is a complicated regulatory path,” says Biberman. “Just like our childcare micro-enterprise work,

we are quite adept at clearing the path and taking people through the process to help them get set up.” WHEDco has ten applications that are pending and we have already gotten two Green Carts out on the streets. “The first two are the hardest,” she explains.

Bronx Music Heritage Center

WHEDco’s next major housing and economic development project is the Bronx Music Heritage Center. Located in the Melrose section of the Bronx, the development will celebrate the rich cultural legacy of the Bronx, something too many people have forgotten. It will provide 293 affordable apartments, with a set-aside for elder musicians, as well as community performance and event space; a hydroponic rooftop garden and open recreational space.

While both Urban Horizons and Intervale Green have allowed WHEDco to establish youth programs through partnerships with local schools, the Bronx Music Heritage Center will go one significant step further. It will include a brand new on-site arts-based high school created in partnership with DreamYard, the largest arts education provider in the Bronx.

“We think the school day could be a more productive experience than what we often see,” says Biberman. While WHEDco would prefer to partner with the Department of Education on developing a new public school, it is also open to the idea of developing a charter school to utilize the space. WHEDco hopes to break ground on the project in 2013 and complete it in 2015.

Nonprofit Excellence

As it marks its 20th year, WHEDco has grown to have a \$13 million budget and 160 full time employees. The agency was recently selected as one of ten semi-finalists for this year’s New York Times Nonprofit Excellence Awards. “We’ve looked at this competition for a few years and decided that we were ready to apply,” says Biberman. “We have good internal management practices in the areas of fiscal, legal, board governance. We, as an organization, have just completed a strategic planning process and we believe we are in a good place.” Regardless of the final outcome, WHEDco’s selection as a semi-finalist is, in itself, a significant accomplishment.

A lot has happened over the past 20 years – for WHEDco and for the Bronx as a whole. Yet Biberman fears that the recent economic crisis has dramatically worsened the City’s economic and community development challenges. “This economy isn’t going to get back on its feet in a way that benefits people in the Bronx for a long time,” she says. Yet, she believes that these are the kinds of challenges which WHEDco may be well positioned to address. “If the labor market isn’t going to exist as we knew it, there are things we can do in the area of enterprise development that help people to help themselves.”