

INTERVALE GREEN INITIAL RESIDENT REPORT 2010

WHEDco and Intervale Green

WHEDco's mission is to work with families in the Bronx who struggle with the multiple challenges presented by poverty and who, like all of us, aspire to a healthy and financially stable future. The organization seeks to replicate the attributes found in prosperous communities—safe and healthy homes, professional childcare, extra-curricular activities, access to physicians, learning experts and therapists, and opportunities to develop small businesses—for low-income families throughout the Bronx. WHEDco offers innovative, inter-connected and high-quality solutions that make the Bronx a more beautiful, equitable, and economically vibrant place to live and raise a family.

In 2009, 127 low-income and formerly homeless families moved into Intervale Green, WHEDco's affordable housing complex in the Crotona Park East section of the South Bronx (Figure 1). The largest affordable multi-family high-rise Energy Star building in the country, the new development utilizes energy-efficient technology and environmentally friendly materials. The site also offers green roofs, private courtyards, and a public sculpture garden. Full time on-site family support staff provide case management and in-depth counseling services to families as needed.

The research project

In 2009, WHEDco's Department of Research and Evaluation initiated a research project in order to, first and foremost, get to know the people who had moved into the building. How did they feel about moving in? Did they have any unaddressed needs? Could WHEDco initiate programs to serve these needs or interests? Secondly, the research would serve as an initial data point against which any changes could be measured through follow-up research. If the purpose of constructing new affordable housing is to provide families with a secure, stable base upon which they can improve their situation in life, then any claim of success depends upon this type of tracking.

The data for this research is derived from several different sources. Between July 2009 and January 2010, the Department of Research and Evaluation conducted a survey of building residents. The survey was distributed to individual tenants by WHEDco's social services staff who were located onsite at Intervale Green. This survey is supported by data from two other sources: tenant applications and case management data. Before moving in to Intervale Green, tenants were required to go through an intensive screening process, including income certification and home visits. Confidential files that include this information are kept on the premises; this data is reported here in

Figure 1: Intervale Green, located at 1330 Intervale Ave, Bronx, NY



aggregate form only. WHEDco also keeps track of client demographics and outcomes with an onsite case management database. As with the application data, this case data is reported only in the aggregate.

After describing the participant population, this report discusses resident needs and interests and then moves on to a more qualitative exploration of residents' feelings about their situation in life, including the move to Intervale Green. The final section discusses implications of these findings for WHEDco programming.

The participants

Demographics

In the roughly six months under study, 89 of the 127 households at Intervale Green (70%) responded to the survey. Of those respondents, 85% took the survey in English and the other 15% took it in Spanish. Most of the respondents (89%) were women and somewhat evenly split in race/ethnicity between African-American (48%) and Hispanic or Latino (51%). Almost two-thirds of respondents were between the ages of 25 and 44, and another eight percent were 55 or older. About 30% of respondents had not finished high school, another 30% had graduated high school and another 30% had taken some college courses; six respondents had a college degree and one had an MBA. Almost three-quarters of the respondents were single parents, with another twelve percent living in two-parent households. Nearly all reported that they were US citizens. These proportions quite closely match the demographics found in both the tenant application and case management data for Intervale Green residents.

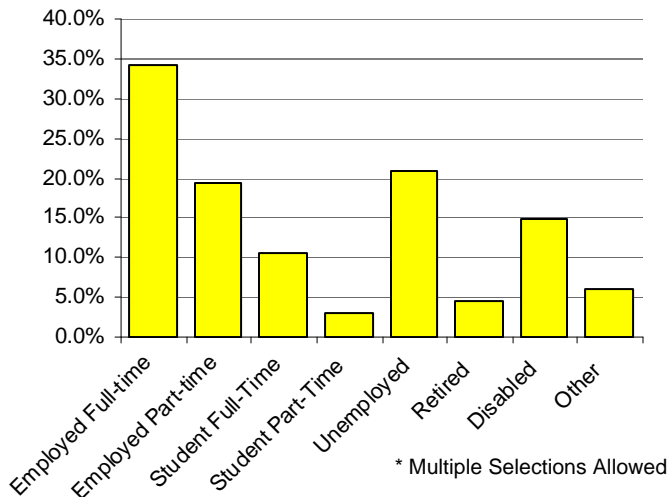
The survey also asked respondents to report their household income and household members' employment status. Over 90% of households reported an annual income of less than \$35,000, the median household income for Bronx County. According to tenants' application data, their median income was just over \$16,500 and 28% reported an income of less than \$10,000 a year.¹ Nearly half reported wage income as a primary source of household income, and the same amount reported public benefits as a primary source of income. Nearly all households chose either one or the other source, implying that households are not generally mixing wage and benefits income. As shown in Figure 2, 21% of survey respondents were unemployed, a rate considerably higher than the 12% of Bronx County residents overall. About 15% of tenants were receiving child support at the time of application and over 18% included a family member who was physically disabled.

Housing history

Many of the residents of Intervale Green have lived in temporary housing in the past; for many of them, this move was a significant step toward a kind of family stability not experienced for some time. Almost half of the surveyed households had at some point resided in the shelter system, for a period ranging from one month to ten years with a median stay of one year. At the time of application, just under 30% were living in public housing. Even if struggling households obtain permanent housing, often they must share the limited space with another family, frequently referred to as "doubling up." About a third of the households at Intervale Green had "doubled up" with another family. These situations lasted from two months to 27 years, with a median stay of four and a half years.

Given the difficulties these households have faced, it is no sur-

Figure 2: Percent of Respondents by Employment/Student Status *



¹ A much higher proportion of tenants (44%) reported an annual income below \$10,000 in the survey than in the tenant application. There are several reasons why this might be the case: 1) tenants might have lost income between the time of the initial application and the date of the survey, 2) those with very low incomes might have been more involved with the onsite social worker and therefore more likely to have taken the survey, and/or 3) tenants might be underreporting their incomes on the survey.

prise that so many were happy to be moving into a brand new permanent housing situation. When asked what features of the building most made them want to move there, respondents were most likely to choose the affordability and quality of the apartment and the condition of the building. As will be discussed later, their additional comments primarily focused on the beauty and cleanliness of the building, its amenities, its safety and the joys of having their own place.

Needs and Interests

One of the primary concerns of the survey is to ascertain what types of programs might be of interest to residents of the building. This inquiry was framed by WHEDco's already existing expertise in several areas: childcare and youth, social services, green education, health and community development.

Childcare and youth

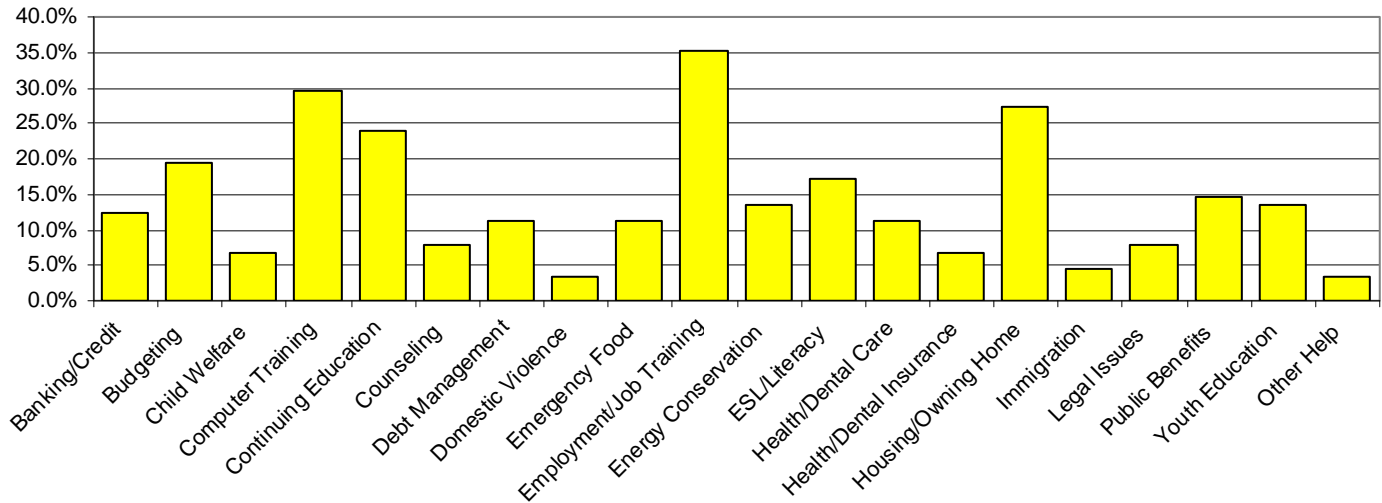
WHEDco currently has three programs that relate to childcare and youth: the Head Start Early Childhood Discovery Center for three to four year-olds, the Education and Youth Development Department for children and teens, and the Home-Based Childcare Program (HBCC) for those who want to start or build their childcare businesses. For this reason, it was very important to find out what needs, if any, residents have for these types of services.

According to survey responses, 58% of households who reported having children under thirteen do not currently have childcare. Twelve people specifically mentioned that they would like more information about childcare, including potential openings or available subsidies. Those who do have childcare are more likely to use home-based childcare than center-based childcare. These two findings suggest that there may be both 1) a considerable need for childcare services and 2) a considerable demand for training in how to build home-based childcare businesses. In fact, 37% of the residents surveyed said that they have an interest in learning how to start their own childcare businesses.

Survey findings on youth services are similar to those for childcare. Sixty-five percent of households who reported having school-aged children do not currently participate in an after-school program. Those who do participate in such a program are most likely to rely on school-based settings over center-based or other types of programs. Additionally, there were twelve requests each for information about afterschool and summer camp. This implies that there is an unmet need for afterschool services as well as for childcare.

An important addendum: 93% of parents reported that all of their children were doing very well or OK in school. This could have several interpretations: children are doing well without the

Figure 3: Percent of Respondents Seeking Assistance with Issues



additional support of afterschool programming, children are not doing well by certain standards but parents have different expectations for them, or parents are not being fully truthful on the survey for any number of reasons. We discuss implications for these findings in the last section of the report.

Social services and green education

WHEDco also has a very successful Family Support and Housing Services Department that serves clients primarily through counseling, crisis management and benefit advocacy. Social work staff from the Department assist residents onsite with any issues that may arise. Several of the questions in the survey therefore address these types of needs. Topping the list of desired services is assistance with employment and job training, followed by computer training, housing issues and continuing education (Figure 3). Only 29% of respondents are currently receiving assistance on these types of issues with other agencies, suggesting a gap in service that WHEDco might be able to fill.

Additionally, nearly half of participants were interested in life skills workshops, primarily on topics such as budgeting, health and to a smaller extent, parenting. Social services are also deeply intertwined with “green” education, particularly as they relate to both saving money and improving health. Over three-quarters of respondents were interested in learning about the green features of the building, including energy-efficient lighting, windows, appliances and bathroom fixtures. It is hoped that the move to an energy-efficient building, combined with green education, will help residents lower their energy bills. To that end, an initial question asked residents who paid their own electric bills about how much they spent prior to the move. The median for the winter was \$80 per month with bills ranging up to \$600, and the median for the summer was \$100 per month ranging up to \$400. Hopefully a follow-up survey will show a significant decrease in these billing amounts.

Health

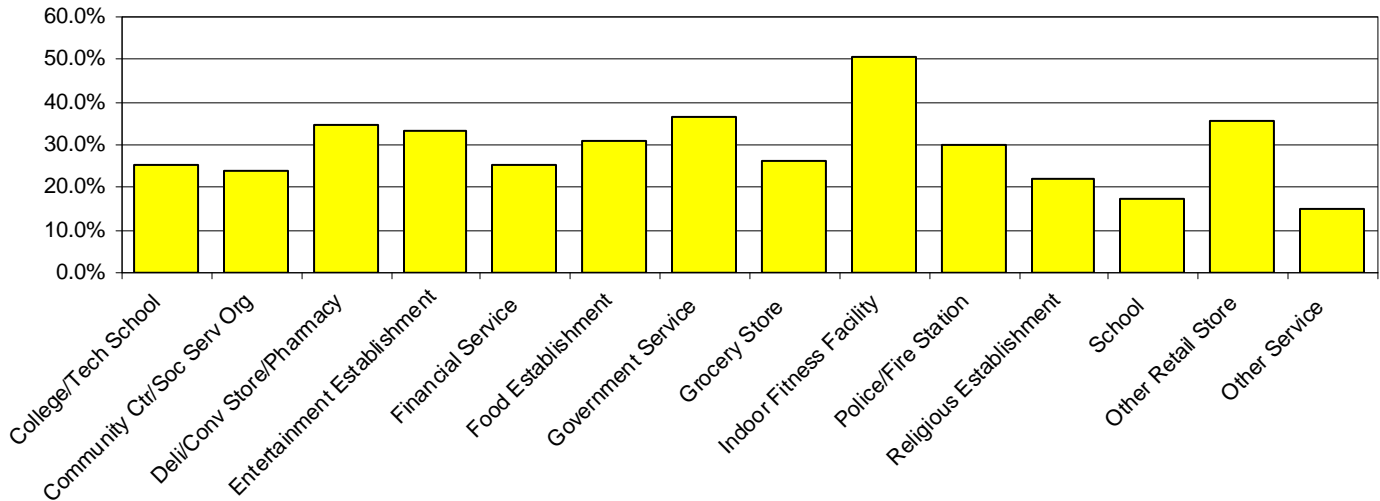
Given the continuing dire news about health in the South Bronx, particularly surrounding dire news about health in the South Bronx, particularly surrounding obesity-related illness (Matte et al, 2007), WHEDco is also looking to expand its efforts to integrate healthy activities into its programming. The survey asks participants both about their current health and activity level, as well as what types of healthy activities they might be interested in if they were offered.

Overall the survey reveals considerable health concerns among residents at Intervale Green. Over a quarter of respondents rated their own health fair to poor. Twelve percent said that they had been told by a health professional that they have diabetes, higher than the rate of diagnosed diabetes in New York City overall but about on par with the rate for Black and Hispanic New Yorkers (Van Wye et al., 2008). Ninety-three percent of those responding said they ate less than the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, with 16% reporting they did not eat any at all. Over 75% of those responding consumed one or more sweetened drinks per day, much higher than the 27% of New Yorkers overall. Of those who drank sweetened drinks, the average daily consumption was over three drinks, totaling about 450 calories each day from these drinks alone.

Residents are also not likely to get enough exercise to offset unhealthy eating patterns. Thirty-eight percent of Bronx residents overall do not walk the recommended ten blocks each day to reach a healthy level of physical activity. Alarmingly, over half of Intervale Green residents do not reach this recommended amount of activity. Intervale Green residents climbed a median

The average consumption was over three sweetened drinks, totaling about 450 calories each day

Figure 4: Percent of Respondents Desiring Businesses or Organizations in the Neighborhood



of seven flights of stairs per day, burning only an estimated 35 calories through this method of exercise. One third of residents said they never exercise recreationally (go to the gym, jog, play sports, etc.) but over 50% of residents said they sometimes do, and this population may be responsive to greater opportunities for recreational activities. Almost two-thirds of Intervale Green residents were interested in learning more about healthy living activities on site, particularly walking clubs.

Community development

The development of Intervale Green was never designed to occur in a vacuum. WHEDco has always intended to support the development of a community, within and outside the boundaries of the building. To that end, the survey asks building residents what types of businesses and organizations they would like in the area. Residents were most likely to say they wanted a fitness facility nearby (Figure 4). Government services (library, post office), retail (general store, furniture, clothing), delis or pharmacies and entertainment were also popular choices.

Residents were also interested in developing a sense of community within the building: almost two-thirds were interested in participating in a tenant association. Residents' responses on their tenant applications convey a similar readiness to engage. Over 90% were already connected to their community through family ties and 13% were already participating in community

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activities such as church, parent-teacher associations and community volunteering.

Perspectives on life in the building

One of the primary ideals behind WHEDco's mission is that all families deserve a beautiful, healthy and safe home. Intervale Green was built to satisfy this ideal in its design and management. Residents were therefore asked to comment on the both their new home and how they felt about their lives after moving in.

A new home

Prior to moving to Intervale Green, households faced difficult living situations. At the time of application, less than two out of ten applicants rated their building conditions as “good” with about a third of applicants living in unclean conditions in poor repair. Almost a quarter lived in buildings without a locked entrance door. Over a quarter of applicant households were asking for a safer environment and another 16% looking for less crowded, more healthy conditions.

The move to Intervale Green represents a significant step up for many families. Nearly all residents were very (73%) or somewhat (21%) happy with their choice to move to Intervale Green. They were most often impressed with the beauty and cleanliness of the building. They also enjoyed its safety, amenities (green space, laundry), convenience to transportation and spacious apartments.

Many commented individually on the beauty, amenities and safety of the building:

The beauty of the building and the decoration reminds me of Puerto Rico.

The apartment is in great condition and it's very spacious. The building is beautiful; as a family we feel safe and at home.

Very nice building, super is great! The security guards are great. Laundry room on every floor I love!

I am so happy to have heat and to be able to feel good about cleaning my house, not having to hide cracks in the wall or broken light fixtures or worry about someone jumping in my window or dog poop on the sidewalk or all the other things that Intervale Green has erased from my haunted memory. Thank you! I love to do laundry. You make it easy when it's right down the hall.

Others mentioned the benefits of health and tranquility associated with new living quarters:

I feel satisfied because of the security the building provides for us and also because it is a very quiet area and it is good not to see a lot of hustle and bustle and I feel more calm for myself and my children and grandchildren.

The building is nice. I like the park, party room and grilling area. I think it will be a good place for my kid and they will be able to go outside.

I am happy that me and my family are in a beautiful apartment. I feel very safe in the building. My daughter can breathe better and not be sick all the time."

Many of those who had spent time in temporary or insufficient housing were thankful to have a nice place to call their own:

I am very happy because now I have two bedrooms just for me and my children. I use to share a two bedroom with many people.

I am very happy cause my son has his own room and I have my own privacy.

I got my home back. After my landlord lost his home, I lost mine. And I never thought I would have a place to call home again. Thanks WHEDco.

It's all new to me. I love my independence.

"I feel like life is good for me this time. I have so much to be thankful for and I am proud of the way things are falling into place in my life."

Finally, residents were thankful for the support offered by onsite staff.

New start for my family. Feel very safe and cared for. Great staff and love meetings held for the community.

The staff is very informative, relatable, respectful, and resourceful.

I'm very happy to live in this building because it is clean, safe, energy efficient, and Intervale Green offers extra services to help us tenants. The staff is also very attentive to our needs as tenants.

I'm happy because my family can receive support that we really need after moving out of temporary housing and helping us get back on our feet and establish and complete goals.

The picture was not entirely rosy: 13% of the comments were negative toward the building and its management. Some residents commented on issues with keys, laundry machines and staff while others were dissatisfied with noise from the nearby subway or concerned about neighborhood safety.

A new life

When surveyed, residents felt very positive about their lives. Two-thirds felt excellent or very good about their life in general, including about family, friends, work and health; none felt poor about their life in general. In their responses, they were most likely to write about either feeling good across multiple aspects of their lives or feeling good about their families in particular. They also commented on being thankful for good health, or that they have gotten themselves to where they are now and look forward to where they are going next. Finally, several discussed the peace of mind that comes from moving to a nice new place.

Some residents discussed a general sense of satisfaction with their lives:

I feel good about myself and my life. I am thankful for the people who have encouraged me to strive for the best things in life.

I feel like life is good for me this time. I have so much to be thankful for and I am proud of the way things are falling into place in my life.

Individual comments about family life very often focused on the joy of children:

Life in general is excellent. My kids are great. So as long as that stays the same my life is great.

I feel very good about my life as I have a place just for me and my children and energy to go to work. I feel good health is most important of all.

After being sick (cervical cancer) and having a ministroke last year, I like to enjoy my girls to the fullest. I don't sweat the small stuff, just work hard and try to take care of them the best I can. That is what I live for: them!

I am a Christian so I keep God first and that keeps me happy and I love being a mom so I look forward to seeing my children grow into successful adults.

Several felt satisfied with what they had accomplished so far in their lives and looked forward to the future:

I would like to further my education and become a nurse (pediatrics and labor and delivery) so I can make the kind of money I would like. Make sure my kids finish high school and college.

I feel that my life has changed a lot. I have accomplished many of my goals in life. I am determined to make my life better now that I have my apartment.

I feel very good about my life. I'm trying to do what I have to do, I'm trying to go back to school and do good with myself.

And finally, residents were deeply affected by the move itself:

Starting to feel better now that I moved. New life, new apartment. Different things are starting to happen in my life.

We feel that we were given a chance to improve our way of living that would benefit the lives of our children and self improvement.

Those who felt only fair about their lives attributed those feelings to financial difficulties, depression or exhaustion, grief, and health issues. Even these residents, however, tended to express belief in a better future.

Programming Implications

These findings lead to some important implications for WHEDco programming. In order to accommodate residents' needs, WHEDco can expand its current services or expand its referral network to complementary organizations. To start, the assessment shows residents have an unmet need for childcare and afterschool services. To this end, staff at Intervale Green have provided many residents with childcare information as well as onsite activities for children, including craft days and recreational activities. In addition, WHEDco in the process of shifting its social work staffing to focus more specifically on activities for children in the building, including homework help.

The fact that those who do use childcare use home-based care implies a demand for this specific type of care. This fact, combined with a desire among over a third of residents to start their own home-based childcare businesses, suggests a key role for

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WHEDco's Home-Based Childcare program. HBCC could create employment opportunities for Intervale Green residents while simultaneously increasing the supply of quality home-based childcare available to parents in the building. In fact, in 2011, HBCC will be relocating from WHEDco's hub to the commercial space on the first floor of Intervale Green, providing immediate access to residents who might desire access to childcare training or providers.

Residents also expressed an interest in four primary areas of assistance: employment/job training, computer training, housing and continuing education. They also showed an interest in life skills workshops on budgeting and health, as well as green education. Since early 2010, the social worker at Intervale Green has been regularly offering employment assistance to residents, specifically help with resumes, job searches, interview preparation, relevant exams and rap sheet cleanups. WHEDco staff have also led or organized several health-related workshops on topics like nutrition, fitness, lupus, breast awareness and yoga and regularly hold green workshops on energy efficiency and environmentally-friendly cleaning. Less is occurring in relation to computer training, housing and continuing education, suggesting that these areas of interest could be developed into future workshops.

Residents' health is of special concern. The underconsumption of fruits and vegetables and overconsumption of sweetened drinks, combined with insufficient physical activity, means residents are at risk for obesity-related illness. WHEDco staff attempted to organize both walking and gardening clubs, but as of yet residents have not been participating in these activities in any great numbers. Staff have also used building design to encourage healthy activities by painting stairwell murals (Figure 5) and a hopscotch course in the courtyard, while WHEDco's summer barbecues for residents recently included blood pressure screenings. In the summer of 2010, Intervale Green was selected to undergo a study by Rutgers University on how green and health-related education and activities affect physical activity levels and indoor air quality, thereby improving the health of residents. This research will likely shed light on the best ways to enable and encourage healthier living at Intervale Green.

Residents also expressed a desire for new businesses and organizations in the community. Topping the list was an indoor fitness facility, followed by government services, retail, delis or pharmacies and entertainment. WHEDco's Department of Housing and Community Development has been working over the past year to attract businesses to the area to satisfy these types of needs. Invitations and follow-up contacts have been made to delis, apparel stores, and music shops, and WHEDco is currently researching indoor fitness facilities to find the best fit for the

neighborhood. Government services, like post offices and libraries, are unfortunately limited by a tight city budget, though there is a post office two blocks from the building. Finally, residents also showed an interest in a tenant association. WHEDco's new Activities Coordinator will be working with tenants to train them on leadership skills as a first step in helping to organize such a group.

Residents' qualitative responses about the building and their lives help to inform WHEDco's overall approach toward residents. Though they did express specific needs, residents are generally happy with the move and with how things are going for them. Therefore, any programming must come from a standpoint of adding to an already accomplished life, rather than fixing a problematic one. Issues do come up and need addressing, but this type of positive standpoint would frame assistance as an enhancement. For example, WHEDco's onsite social worker has noticed that residents are not interested in coming to a support group. They are, however, interested in participating in quilting and cooking clubs, which in turn provide safe and fun environments for residents to share their feelings with one another.

Many residents also expressed how happy it made them to have their own place, letting them experience a sense of independence that had been lacking previously. Any programming must also therefore respect this independence not only by being decidedly different in tone and purpose from any government services that may have diminished this sense of independence, but also by being as non-intrusive and complementary to residents' existing lives as possible.

In conclusion, residents at Intervale Green are still in need of some assistance on specific issues, but also see their new home and new life in a very positive and hopeful light. WHEDco would best serve these residents by being an equal partner in their aspirations toward a healthy and financially stable future.

Citations

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Acknowledgements

This report was completed by Dr. Meredith Reitman, Director of Research and Evaluation at WHEDco, with the assistance of Sarah Feeney of Fordham University, Brandi Hughes of Ashford University, Stefany Santos of St. John's University and the staff of WHEDco's Family Support and Housing Services Department.

Figure 5: Stairwell mural painted by Intervale Green residents and Central Synagogue volunteers

