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An uneasy mix [ARTICLE]

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An uneasy mix

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U. of C. researchers look at CHA's mixed- income communities

A study led by University of Chicago researchers is taking dead aim at a pioneering experiment — one that is anchored on the South Side of Chicago.

The Chicago Housing Authority's \$1.4-billion Plan for Transformation has faced numerous obstacles since it began a decade ago, not least because the nationwide housing slump has slowed construction of the new mixed-income communities replacing troubled public housing complexes.

Less visible has been the challenge of actually living in the new developments — five of which are located in Bronzeville, in various stages of completion.

The egalitarian notion of mixing homeowners, market-rate renters and public housing residents in the

and public housing residents in the same development has proved more complicated in practice than many expected, according to new research from a team led by Mark Joseph and Robert Chaskin.

Joseph is an assistant professor at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University, and Chaskin is an associate professor and deputy dean of strategic initiatives at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration.

The first of several research briefs, "Building Community in Mixed-Income Developments," was published earlier this year and distributed to an array of policy makers and scholars last week.

It focuses on two Plan for Transformation sites: Oakwood Shores, rising in place of the former Ida B. Wells, Madden Park and Darrow Homes in Bronzeville, and Westhaven Park, replacing the former Henry Horner Homes on the West Side.

The research team observed community meetings, reviewed documents and news articles, and interviewed a random sample of 65 residents, developers, service providers, property managers, community leaders and city officials.

A stakeholder in one of the developments (not named in the brief) reported, "I think we came in with the idea that it was going to be like this big happy community

where all mixed-income — you know, public housing, market-rate — were going to be playing together, neighbors were going to be chatting it up. And we've scaled that back.”

The report lists a range of strategies employed by developers and community leaders to bring residents together: holding community meetings, sponsoring group activities, providing social services and making sure the developments themselves include common space for people to gather.

Participation has been “uneven and compartmentalized,” the report found. A market-rate homeowner is quoted as saying, “They have meetings for the residents in the rental buildings, and we have meetings for residents in the condo buildings, but there’s never like one unified — so it’s always like, ‘They did this,’ or they’re saying, ‘They did this.’ And their complaints are different, and no one ever hears what they are.”

Not all residents feel welcome outside their own economic group. Another stakeholder told researchers, “We do community bingo, we have salsa class, we have stepping class, we have financial workshops, and 90 percent of our participants would be public housing. We have very few [residents of] market rate or [affordable units] that would sort of attach because there was a stigma that any offerings were sort of social

service.”

Three other briefs examining various aspects of the mixed-income experiment are forthcoming in the next few months, according to Amy

Khare, the University of Chicago researcher who is the project director. The later research includes Park Boulevard, the mixed-income development replacing Stateway Gardens in Bronzeville, she said.

The study, slated to wrap up in November after three years, could continue if funding comes through, she said. Case Western Reserve and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation are backing the project.

The work has been intensive, with researchers observing more than 280 community meetings to date, Khare said. “We are in the field on an almost daily basis.”

Mixed-income communities are a “unique social experiment” still in the early stages of implementation, she said. “It really is about moving from the theoretical idea of what mixed-income communities are intended to be about to coming to grips with the realities.”

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