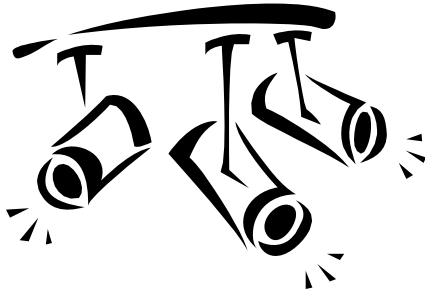


# Homewards



A publication of the Self-Determination Housing Project of Pennsylvania November 2006



## Spotlight on the SDHP Regional Housing Coordinator Program

### RHC Program - A Network of Connectivity

By Peggy Robertson

#### **A Training Program**

Where can Pennsylvania agencies that serve people with disabilities turn to get assistance? How can these agencies get a better understanding of the barriers that people face trying to find affordable, accessible housing? Where can agencies get training to help people with disabilities navigate the system?

The Regional Housing Coordinator (RHC) Program is a technical assistance and housing information resource that bridges the information gap for Pennsylvania communities between service and housing providers. The RHC Program, which began in 2002, is funded through the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW). The project is a collaborative effort between DPW, the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) and the Self-Determination Housing Project of Pennsylvania (SDHP).

Five agencies were identified across the

state to work with state agencies, organizations, and housing professionals to facilitate access to housing options and opportunities for people with disabilities. These agencies, Allegheny County Disability Connection, CIL of North Central PA (CILNCP), CIL of Central PA (CILCP), Residential Living Options, Inc. (RLO) and Voices for Independence each have a designated Coordinator and serve as a single point of access for technical assistance, training and outreach at the regional level.

Mary Penny, SDHP's Statewide Housing Coordinator, supervises, trains and provides technical assistance to the regional housing coordinators. She has developed a series of training modules that are offered in collaboration with the RHC agencies. These training modules include information on:

- PREP – Prepared Renters Program
- The Waiver System in Pennsylvania
- Housing Coalitions that serve people with cross-disabilities
- Home Modifications

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- Techniques for landlords and affordable housing providers to market property to people with disabilities
- Affordable housing systems such as vouchers, public housing, etc.

### **The Need to Grow**

Carla Falkenstein, Manager of Housing Services at PHFA, has been impressed with what the RHCs have been able to accomplish. The five RHCs have been playing an integral role letting people know what is going on in the housing world statewide. Ms. Falkenstein said, "The RHC program preceded a lot of the housing activity that is now being coordinated across the state. The RHCs have raised awareness about the barriers that people with disabilities face in Pennsylvania by constantly reinforcing the need for affordable, accessible housing with a strong and consistent message. The RHC program is finishing its fourth year and it has really gotten a lot of traction. Thanks to Mary Penny's leadership, the bar has been raised and all of the RHCs are

operating with a higher level of expertise."

Initially the RHCs served in a part time capacity. DPW, PHFA and SDHP recognized the need to expand the role of the RHC from part time to full time. Because the responsibilities of the RHC have increased, funding is available for three of the five RHC positions to become full time.

Ms. Falkenstein explained, "The RHCs have an almost impossible task because they are responsible for so many counties. They have done a great job of maintaining visibility and providing outreach at the grass roots level. DPW has provided funding for three RHCs to go full time and we have identified the three RHCs that represent the counties in the state where the Nursing Home Transition (NHT) program is being rolled out. These RHCs will be able to provide training to the NHT coordinators assisting people who are ready to move out of a nursing home and into the community. However, if this program works and we have sufficient funds to make all of the RHCs full time, this would increase effectiveness in all of the

counties to advocate for more affordable, accessible housing and supports in the community."

Ms. Penny is very excited about the expansion of the program. "The Disability Connection, RLO and the CILCP have identified full time RHCs who are all highly qualified. My hope is that all of our RHCs will eventually be able to become full time."

### **Focus on Voices**

Connie Burnett is the Regional Housing Coordinator/Community Integration Specialist with Voices For Independence. Ms. Burnett said the RHC program has helped to expand her role within the agency. She explained, "It has been helpful to come together with community agencies from other parts of the state and learn how we can do things better. We are sharing our resources so that we can better serve our consumers. At Voices, we do seminars and presentations throughout the region and bring in speakers to tell people about the different services in our community. We provided direction to the Local Housing Options Team (LHOT) and helped them set goals and assess

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what their needs were. The LHOT will be working with Mercer County to encourage them to apply for funding such as the access grant. It is also gratifying to see the LHOT working together to create a Resource Directory. If we eventually have a full time RHC position, I think we can expand even further into the community, reach out more to the public housing providers and the housing authority and do even more education about compliance with the fair housing laws. We can make the good work we are doing now even better."

#### ***Focus on CILNCP***

Getting information on housing options to as many people as possible is a key component of the RHC. Carla Mitcheltree, RHC and Housing Program Manager for the Center For Independent Living in North Central PA (CILNCP) has found that her role has brought her into the housing mix within the State and has given her a broader view of available housing for people with disabilities. "My involvement with the RHC has made me much more aware of what is

happening at the state level for housing and what resources are available in the region". At the CIL, Ms. Mitcheltree is the main contact for all housing inquiries from consumers as well as agencies seeking resources for their consumers. Because of this need, a Resource Directory and Resource Library is maintained that includes information on housing options, waivers, fair housing laws, home modification, home ownership, and ways to eliminate barriers in order to live independently. "In addition I continue to reach out into the entire region and develop relationships that ultimately benefit our consumers." In her previous experience with the Local Community Action Agency and Provider Agency, Ms. Mitcheltree was involved with building projects for people with disabilities. "I interfaced with developers, architects, and contractors reviewing the building plans and doing on site evaluations to assure accessibility requirements were being met, realizing that a large part of the job was to educate on the housing needs of the disabled. As a Regional Housing Coordinator I feel I have a greater opportunity to assist the population we serve,

eliminate barriers for housing and enhance their quality of life".

#### ***Focus on RLO***

Catherine Friedman was recently hired at RLO to take on full time responsibilities as the RHC. She brings with her experience and expertise in understanding the housing needs of people with disabilities. "I most recently worked with the Department of Community Development in Chester County on their Community Services Team. My position there was focused on managing the funding streams that we received which were subsequently subcontracted to non-profit agencies in need of resources to provide housing for people with disabilities. RLO was one of the agencies we worked with, and I was familiar with them through my participation in the Chester County Local Housing Options Team (LHOT). When I learned about the RHC position at RLO, I knew I wanted to become part of their team to help meet the housing needs of people with disabilities. I am impressed with their involvement with the RHC program and the strong relationship they have with

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SDHP. Part of my role will be to create a housing data base that warehouses all of the information out there to serve as valuable resources for all of us who are trying to get people with disabilities housed. The RHC Program is doing important work by coordinating this resource to make it available for all the regions in the state. I have only been on the job for a short period of time and am looking forward to expanding the RHC program and moving it forward."

#### **Focus on CILCP**

Deb Stumpf recently joined the CILCP and will share the position of Regional Housing Coordinator with Lynn Stewart, who has been the RHC for 19 counties and is also the Local Housing Options Team Coordinator for Dauphin County. Ms. Stewart will be able to help transition Ms. Stumpf into the position full time as she gains more experience with the state's Central Region. Ms. Stewart has worked for the CILCP for four years and is an expert on housing issues and accessibility. She is skilled at collaboration and working in other counties to put teams together to develop accessible housing. Ms.

Stewart is pleased to have Ms. Stumpf on board to share this position. Ms. Stumpf brings with her experience working with the disability community. She worked as a consultant to Abilities in Motion (AIM), the Center for Independent Living in Berks County, on the Pennsylvania Department of Aging's waiver program. She was then hired as an employee of AIM as a Nursing Home Transition Coordinator for approximately 1 ½ years, successfully transitioning 26 consumers to independent living from nursing homes. Ms. Stumpf said, "I encountered a lot of different barriers in order to make those transitions possible. I therefore understand how to navigate the system. As a volunteer, I founded and became chairperson of the Pennsylvania Manufactured Home Owners of America, Inc. and worked with the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office and the Pennsylvania Legislature to successfully pass much needed amendments to the Mobile Home Park Rights Act. This gives me great experience as an advocate for people's rights, which is

transferable to advocating for affordable, accessible housing for people with disabilities." Ms. Stumpf and Ms. Stewart will work together with other key players in the region to collectively and collaboratively take on the challenges of increasing the housing stock of affordable, accessible housing. Ms. Stumpf commented, "It is heartening to see that a lot of energy has been generated to break down the barriers that people with disabilities face."

#### **Focus on Disability Connection**

Steven Chopek is the Southwest Regional Housing Coordinator with the Disability Connection in the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. He has been the full time RHC since June 1<sup>st</sup> and he loves what he is doing. Mr. Chopek has worked with multiple state and non-profit agencies administering grant-funded programs, some of which have focused on housing. He is responsible for eleven counties in his region and stated, "The RHC program is flexible enough to be tailored to each county, whether it is as large as Allegheny or as small as

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## Testing for Compliance

By Peggy Robertson

It has become widely recognized that there is a great need for affordable, accessible housing throughout Pennsylvania. Many people look to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Affairs (HUD) to help provide low-income housing for people with disabilities. However, HUD plays another very important role when it comes to housing for people with disabilities. Ms. Wanda Nieves, Director of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (FHEO) with HUD's Philadelphia office since 1999, explained that the FHEO offices within HUD serve as the Civil Rights arm of the Department. At a Self-Determination Housing Project Affiliates meeting in early October, Ms. Nieves explained that her office does not provide housing. Her office has the responsibility to determine if recipients of federal financial assistance spend their funds and implement their programs and services in compliance with the fair housing requirements and other civil rights related program requirements under Community Planning and Development, Public and Indian Housing and Multifamily Housing. Ms.

Nieves explained to the Affiliates, "My role as the FHEO Director is to advocate for compliance with the law and to objectively decide if discrimination has occurred against persons with disabilities and others protected under the law. My office doesn't perform advocacy in the way your groups advocate for your different clientele. We are the impartial brokers."

Studies have shown that not only do people with disabilities face barriers when it comes to finding housing that meets their needs, but they are often-times discriminated against when they are looking for housing. One way in which HUD has been trying to increase access to affordable housing for people with disabilities is to measure and characterize the current level of discrimination taking place. Unfortunately, the findings concur that people with disabilities encounter discrimination much more than non-disabled people when looking for housing. Ms. Nieves presented these findings that were the outcome of a HUD-sponsored disability discrimination study. The study, entitled *Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities: Barriers at Every Step*,

measures the level of housing discrimination faced by persons with disabilities. It was prepared by HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research in May 2005. The publication can be accessed in its entirety at [http://www.huduser.org/publications/pdf/DDS\\_Barriers.pdf](http://www.huduser.org/publications/pdf/DDS_Barriers.pdf).

In support of HUD's mission to increase access to housing free from discrimination, this report offers invaluable assistance by documenting some of the types of discriminatory practices persons with disabilities face. According to Alphonso Jackson, Secretary of HUD, the findings will enable HUD to design and target education and outreach programs, as well as support HUD's enforcement of the Fair Housing Act. Ms. Nieves told the Affiliates, "This study used state-of-the-art paired testing procedures whereby a disabled and non-disabled person paired up to search for housing to rent in the Chicago Metropolitan area. The tests I'm discussing today measured discrimination faced by deaf persons and persons using wheelchairs. Tests were conducted to find out how easily the paired testers could get

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access to information, obtain information about available units, get help with the rental application process and then receive invitations for follow-up”

The research found the level of discrimination faced by both deaf persons and persons in wheelchairs to be extremely high.

Significant findings include:

- People who are deaf and use the TTY relay system to inquire about advertised rental units were refused service in one out of four calls.
- Deaf testers received less favorable treatment than their non-disabled partners in six of every ten tests conducted (and were favored in about one third).
- Deaf testers experienced *consistently* adverse treatment relative to their hearing partners in almost half of all tests.
- For wheelchair testers, one in every four disabled testers was told about fewer units than similarly qualified non-disabled testers.
- Testing for discrimination against persons using wheelchairs showed that more than a third of the advertised rental homes and apartments are in buildings that are

inaccessible for wheelchair users to even visit.

- When persons using wheelchairs visited properties they were systematically told about and shown fewer units than comparable non-disabled home seekers.
- Persons using wheelchairs received less information about available units and less information about the application process than their non-disabled counterparts.
- For both wheelchair users and deaf persons, they received far less information about the application process than did similarly qualified non-disabled testers.

In addition to different treatment, this study also sought to measure to what extent landlords complied with the Fair Housing Act requirements of reasonable accommodation and reasonable modification for a person with a disability. A reasonable *accommodation* is a change in policies, practices, or services, when such a change may be necessary to afford a person with a disability equal opportunity and access to use and enjoy a dwelling. An example of a reasonable accommodation includes asking to pay at a different location, mailing in a check or even paying at a later date. A reasonable

*modification* is a structural or other physical change to the unit or housing structure to provide physical access to a person with a disability. An example of a reasonable modification includes modifying an entry way and bathroom and changing switches and door handles. Findings showed that:

- One-in-six housing providers refused a request for a reasonable modification that the tester said they would pay for.
- 19 percent of those with on-site parking refused to make the reasonable accommodation of providing a designated accessible parking space for a wheelchair user.

Ms. Nieves indicated that paired testing is a feasible and effective tool for detecting and measuring discrimination by rental housing providers against persons with disabilities, all of which are protected under the Fair Housing Act. Moreover, persons with disabilities are effective testers. Ms. Nieves noted that private fair housing partners are constantly seeking potential testers to be trained including persons with disabilities who may want to be testers. HUD under their

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Fair Housing Initiative Program (FHIP) provides funding to private fair housing groups, on a competitive basis, to conduct fair housing testing. If a consumer in this geographical area would like to be a tester they can contact the Fair Housing Council of Suburban Philadelphia, ([www.fhcsp.org](http://www.fhcsp.org)) and the Fair Housing Council of Montgomery County ([www.fairhousingmontco.org](http://www.fairhousingmontco.org)) and express their interest.

Ms. Nieves concluded that HUD continues to outreach and educate consumers, advocates and the industry so that the needed changes in policy and practices are effectuated. Assistant Secretary for FHEO Kim Kendrick has funded numerous FHIPs

around the country that will be conducting tests, and in partnership with HUD, conduct outreach and education events to ensure people with disabilities can assert their rights to safe, decent and affordable housing.

Ms. Nieves said, "Not every complaint filed that comes to HUD and our partners is going to result in a finding of discrimination, but it is HUD's job to educate and provide technical assistance, especially to housing authorities, other housing providers, builders, lenders and the real estate industry."

She emphasized, "You can help us do our job. If you see non-compliance, call me. For example, if you pass by a place where a new multifamily development (i.e. high-rises) is being

constructed and you notice that steps were placed on the main entrance into the building, call me. HUD will look into this matter and determine if it will merit a Secretary Initiated Investigation. There are design and construction requirements under the Fair Housing Act that developers, builders, and those who design multifamily developments must abide by. What might seem like a very small barrier to one person is potentially insurmountable to someone with a disability. A discrimination settlement that is small to someone may dramatically change the quality of life for someone else."

For more information about compliance with fair housing laws, contact Ms. Nieves at 215-656-0663.



Bonnie Ludwig, SDHP Housing Advocacy Coordinator and Wanda Nieves, HUD Director of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity

## Your Support Makes Our Voice Louder!

Since 1994, SDHP has been one of Pennsylvania's greatest voices supporting housing choice for people with disabilities. The Self-Determination Housing Project of Pennsylvania, Inc. (SDHP) has listened to you and advocated on your behalf. Just in the past year we have:

- *Provided home modifications to 22 people with disabilities who can now stay in their own home*
- *Conducted outreach in partnership with our Regional Housing Coordinators to 115 groups across the state which included providing technical assistance, information and referral to service providers, landlord associations, housing professionals and numerous other community-based service organizations*
- *Created the Service Organization and Housing Resources Inventory on the PHFA website, which is linked to the SDHP website*

SDHP, a statewide non-profit organization that works to expand housing, promotes self-determination and control in housing for people with disabilities and their families throughout Pennsylvania. We are grateful to have the support of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council, the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development and the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency. We are now appealing to you to help us keep our voice heard throughout the Commonwealth and continue to:

- *Bridge the information gap between the housing and disability communities*
- *Promote state and local partnerships and coalitions that enable people with disabilities to choose and control their own housing*
- *Increase the stock of affordable, accessible, and integrated housing*
- *Expand access to public and private housing programs for people with disabilities*

**SDHP depends on contributions to fulfill its mission.** Your tax-deductible contribution, no matter what amount, will help SDHP continue advocating for additional affordable, accessible and integrated housing and expand access to public and private housing programs for people with disabilities and their families throughout the state. Your support shows your commitment to an agency that truly makes a difference for people with disabilities in Pennsylvania.

Please consider a donation today. Fill in the form on page 10 of this newsletter and mail it in or call 610-873-9595 for more information.

***We thank you in advance for your support.***

Sincerely,

John Tassone  
President, Board of Directors

Gail Hoffmann  
Executive Director

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Greene. I have done a lot of research about each county, looked at the data, and have learned what services are nearby and what are the unique barriers to each region. There is a huge need to fill the gap between service and housing providers and as an RHC, I have been meeting with different agencies, sharing information, facilitating communication and doing grassroots advocacy for systems change. For example, I have been doing outreach in Allegheny and Washington counties to landlord associations and have been educating agencies about home modification programs. I have been successful at building relationships and networking with agencies so that they can better meet the needs of their consumers. Being part of the RHC program has also provided me with valuable resources. Through SDHP I was able to meet with officials from the Governor's Office of Health Care Reform. The RHC program truly provides a network of connectivity."

### ***The Value of Collaboration***

The forte of the RHCs is

their ability to understand the needs of individuals with disabilities in their region and then advocate for systemic changes at the state level. Together with PHFA, and with DPW's continued support, Ms. Penny has been instrumental in coordinating another RHC initiative which will better serve people with disabilities at the grassroots level. Ms. Penny explained, "The RHC agencies have created a county by county Service Organization and Housing Resources Inventory. This resource inventory is accessible on the PHFA website, [www.phfa.org](http://www.phfa.org) and linked to the SDHP website, [www.sdhp.org](http://www.sdhp.org). And thanks to PHFA, it is really user friendly. The site has a map of Pennsylvania, and the resources can be accessed by clicking on each county on the map."

Ms. Falkenstein is pleased that DPW, PHFA and SDHP are partners in the RHC effort. She noted, "PHFA has also increased its efforts to make sure there are accessible, affordable units out there. Statewide, there are now a lot of funding streams to support these efforts and more and more people are stepping up to the plate. The collaboration between DPW, PHFA, SDHP and the RHC entities

is a perfect example of working together to make this happen. It is exciting that many different activities to increase affordable, accessible housing are now moving forward. These partnerships have been very effective and I want to continue to see how we can strengthen the relationship we have with SDHP."

### ***RHC Contact Information:***

#### **Southeast Region**

Residential Living Options, Inc.  
Catherine Friedman  
610-518-6242

#### **Northeast Region**

CIL of North Central PA  
Carla Mitcheltree  
570-327-9070

#### **Central Region**

CIL of Central PA  
Lynn Stewart  
Deb Stumpf  
717-731-1900

#### **Southwest Region**

Allegheny County  
Disability Connection  
Steve Chopek  
412-350-6788

#### **Northwest Region**

Voices for Independence  
Connie Burnett  
814-874-0064  
Toll Free 866-407-0064

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