



Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority

WINTER 2021

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ARHA's Repositioning Strategy Begins

In May 2021, ARHA announced that it had won HUD approval to convert the first three properties, as part of a long-term plan to preserve affordable housing in Alexandria, from public housing funding to Housing Choice Voucher funding. Funding for vouchers is significantly higher than public housing and allowed for some property upgrade to begin this summer.

Two of the first three properties approved for conversation were Park Place (38 units) and Saxony Square (five units). Residents were relocated while their units were renovated, and the first residents have moved back into their renovated units. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Below are snapshots of move-in day at the properties.

Saxony Square Residents



Park Place Residents





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As we close out another challenging year with COVID-19, I want to take this time to acknowledge the incredible contributions of several women, in this newsletter, who have helped to improve ARHA and the lives of our residents and update you on our repositioning and development activities.

I want to make a special acknowledgement and thank you to former Commissioner Carter Flemming. Commissioner Flemming has served ARHA, its residents and the surrounding communities for 20 amazing years. Her time as a Commissioner and positive impact on residents' lives cannot be quantified. We wish her well in her future endeavors for she will be missed.

I also want to provide an update on our repositioning and development activities. Upon becoming CEO of ARHA over 4 years ago, I immediately began to implement the agency's repositioning strategy to transform our entire public housing portfolio to housing choice vouchers using HUD's repositioning initiative, via project-based vouchers, RAD blends, and finally voluntary conversion. I am proud to announce that the strategy is underway. We anticipate having the entire portfolio converted in 4 years.

Additionally, we have begun to move forward with the redevelopment of two incredible properties in our portfolio. We recently received Board approval for the development partner for Samuel Madden, and we have issued the RFP for our Ladrey Senior Highrise. The Madden proposal provides for mixed-income and mixed-use with incredible amenities and services for returning and future residents.

As we move into 2022, I will provide more details of our activities. Until then, stay safe and happy holidays to you and your families.

Keith Pettigrew



Janell Diaz, Director of Asset Management



Janell Diaz is the classic example of the American dream, starting at the bottom rung at ARHA and rising to executive level status.

Janell arrived at ARHA in 2007 with a degree in criminal justice. Before joining the agency, she had an offer to be an undercover officer at a high school because she looked so young, but she said “pretending to be a kid to catch the bad kids” was not what she had in mind when she chose her major.

So, having no idea what public housing or Section 8 were, she saw an ad that caught her attention.

“ARHA was looking for bilingual people at the time, so I applied, not knowing anything about housing,” she said. “And once I started working here, I loved it. I learned by communicating with other housing authorities about how they do their work and how we do ours; and through the years I learned more and more. That’s what allowed me to move from entry level to director.”

About 7% of ARHA’s households are Spanish-speakers and need translation service. In addition to Janell, three other members of her 21-person team are bilingual.

Directing both ARHA’s public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher Program is a big job. The agency manages nearly 1,100 public housing units and administers another approximately 1,600 vouchers, which are used by residents to lease privately managed/owned homes. Most housing authorities divide those jobs because the programs are so different.

ARHA is engaged in a repositioning plan for how the agency’s properties receive funding, but Janell notes that other than upgraded housing with better amenities, the relationship between residents and the housing authority will remain as they are. “We will have the same residents, the same staff, and the housing will be on the same properties,” she said.

Janell said all things considered, operations went fairly smoothly during the pandemic. One challenge did arise, though, getting into residents’ apartments to conduct annual inspections.

“We had some tenants who didn’t want to allow us to go in, which is something we are required to do at least once a year to make sure the unit is being well cared for. We started doing it virtually to make sure that everything is running fine,” she said. “Another change we made was doing all office visits by appointment instead of walk-ins, so it’s more controlled and organized now. We plan to stay with this system even after the pandemic.”

As if Janell’s job isn’t busy enough, she also volunteers, working with aging seniors at a facility in Arlington.

“Between my job and my volunteer work, I am where I want to be,” she said. “It makes me feel good at the end of the day if I’m able to help someone.”

ARHA LEADERS

Gaynelle Bowden-Diaz – Director of Resident and Community Services

Gaynelle Bowden-Diaz took an interesting route to her role directing ARHA's Resident and Community Services group. She grew up in a small town in North Carolina and then earned a degree in Biology from North Carolina A&T in Greensboro. But instead of spending a career dissecting frogs and other biological tasks, she moved to the University of Michigan where she says she became enamored with that school's educational opportunity programs for young students.

"I was doing summer science camp for girls and working with parents in how to do hands-on math and science activities with their kids at home and at-home enrichments," she said. "When I came back to the DC area, I was working for the American Association for Advancement of Science doing outreach events and working with science museums, and so I have always loved helping people. It started out with getting kids interested in math and science and then I found out about a temporary position at the housing authority and applied."

That was 11 years ago. The job became permanent, and she has been at ARHA ever since.

Gaynelle oversees all ARHA resident programs, including those for seniors and youth as well as the agency's Resident Opportunity for Self Sufficiency program. Her team of 10 also coordinates other services for residents such as appointments or connecting them to mental health or other social services, and childcare. And there are community outreach efforts like a youth arts festival, backpack and coat giveaways and food distributions. All these activities represent critical support for ARHA residents to help them overcome barriers to achieving their best lives.

If you are wondering why a housing agency provides all these resident services, Gaynelle said the answer is simple; these services are connected to housing.

"Our primary mission is housing, but along with that you need to make sure residents have access to food or in some cases clothing for your kids or that you can get childcare so that you can go to work," she explained. "Sometimes people need an extra hand and need to make sure all of those things are secure."

Gaynelle is a big believer in trying to connect residents with opportunities to expand their horizons and show them the different possibilities available to them.

"My mom always pushed me toward education, and that was the key to being able to do other things and get out of that small town life and have different experiences in the world," she said. "She encouraged me to do internships. I never came home in the summer. I was in California one summer and then I came to DC. And I know that experience for me, by branching out, by meeting other people from different backgrounds and by experiencing traveling the world, that's how you grow as a person. I meet so many people here in Alexandria, even outside of ARHA, who literally never get outside the city and go across the bridge to DC to see the Smithsonian. I always encourage people to get out of that bubble because that's how we get to know each other and we find out that we're more alike than different, and you also open yourself up to opportunities."

Gaynelle clearly loves her work and feels that ARHA is her home.

"As a people person, my job allows me to do all the things I love," she said. "I get to interact with residents and be of service to them. That is a passion for me. No matter how stressful things can get on any given day, I still love it. As long as ARHA will have me, it's the place I would like to be."



Juwahn Brown, Director of Facilities and Modernization



There's a famous Broadway song that asks, "Why Can't a Woman be More Like a Man?" Well, in ARHA's Facilities and Modernization Department, director Juwahn Brown may be reversing that tune. She oversees an all-male team. Perhaps those men should be more like her!

Seriously, Juwahn gives her guys full credit with helping her climb to the top of the ladder to the position she holds today.

"I learned under some phenomenal people," she said. "I gained all of my knowledge in maintenance by getting down and dirty with the guys. They didn't accept me at first. I had to earn my respect from them. They showed me how to unclog toilets, how to change my oil, change a tire and how to conduct inspections. And they also taught me how to drink beer!"

Juwahn started at ARHA in 2003 for what was supposed to be a four-day executive secretary fill-in assignment for then-executive director William Dearman. She had been in conference planning for the first 10 years of her career, a job that required extensive travel. But then after starting a family she decided she would prefer a role that kept her local.

She was about to accept a job with Alexandria City Public Schools when ARHA convinced her to stay and move into a full-time job. She moved to the Development Department, which at that time also included maintenance and modernization. From there, she moved to facilities coordinator and then facilities manager; and finally in 2017, the then-new CEO Keith Pettigrew promoted her into her current role.

"Staying at ARHA was the best decision I ever made," she said. "Although I felt that being in education would afford me more time with my children, things worked out fabulously. In fact, my last child graduated from college just last year."

Juwahn and her team are responsible for maintaining and making upgrades to ARHA's properties. At the moment, the modernization team is renovating a total of 43 condominiums, 38 at Park Place and five at Saxony Square.

"Right now, we are knee-deep into renovations," she said. "We have a wonderful modernization crew. Their skill level is off the charts, and I'm so honored to be working with these guys. I have learned so much from them over these last 18 years."

And they're learning from her as well. At 4'11", she has shown that being a bit shorter and a different gender than the men she manages is no barrier. She also said the way ARHA leadership has embraced a culture of women in leadership sends a positive message.

"I think this was a needed change, especially in my department because in construction and maintenance you typically think of males; and so when I have interactions with stakeholders and other people in the city or HUD, they look at a woman in charge of maintenance as a refreshing change. It makes me proud," she said.

Juwahn said she is excited about the direction in which the housing authority is moving and about the new possibilities.

"I plan on being here to see those plans turn into reality," she said. "I work with a phenomenal executive team. It's like a family."

Kanesha Brown – ARHA's Dynamic Development Project Manager

When you look around the (virtual) management staff meeting table at ARHA, one thing stands out; the agency has a growing number of female leaders.

The newest member of the leadership team is Development Project Manager Kaneshia Brown, who served in that same role at the DC Housing Authority and brings with her a master's degree in architecture from Hampton University.

Kanesha arrived at ARHA in July at a very exciting time in the agency's history, with a multi-year plan to reshape the look and structure of the agency's properties. That means managing multiple projects.

"You have to be able to multi-task, first being able to fully manage your projects, overseeing the schedule and budget, making sure you get the proper approvals; but it's a lot more than that because when you deal with development you have to deal with the human capital component," she said. "That means making sure that the residents understand what these changes mean to them."

Juggling projects is no problem for Kanesha. That's her natural skillset.

"I have been organized since I was a little girl," she said. "I used to color coordinate all my classes - science was blue, math was red - to help me make a chart of what's due, and I carried that into my adult life, giving each project the proper attention and organizing it in a way that makes sense to me and that I am able to share and communicate with others."

At its heart, development means building buildings and moving people into those buildings, but when it comes to affordable housing, Kanesha, like her boss, ARHA CEO Keith Pettigrew, believes you must build trust between ARHA and residents. At ARHA, decisions about those properties are made with residents, not for them.

"I see the dynamic at ARHA as being more resident centric and involving them in the planning and design," Kanesha said. "Not only do you get to engage more with your residents, but there are always things to be learned just through interactions with people regardless of what title you have. It's a two-way street. By having them be part of the process they learn about development, and we learn from them as the end users."

Of all the projects in the pipeline, Ladrey, the 170-unit high rise which will be demolished and rebuilt, excites her the most.

"With this project, there was a lot of planning with an emphasis being placed on making sure that all residents can return," she said, "even though we will expand to include other income levels on the property as well. It's going to be a lot more fulfilling to see their faces as they return and enter the new building and living space with these different amenities, but still be in an area that they're familiar with."

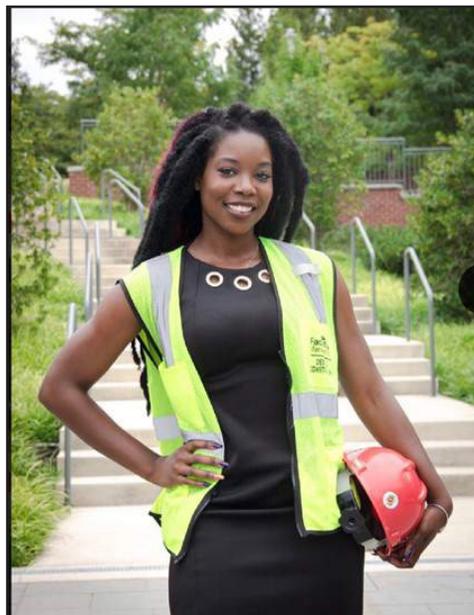
She also points to the importance of redeveloping Samuel Madden because of its location as a gateway project, a site people see as they come into Alexandria.

As exciting as these times are for ARHA, she notes that change is always difficult for some.

"It's really understanding that these changes are for the betterment of the residents and the agency, especially with the changes we are making to our funding streams to raise more money to do this work. At the same time, we have to overcome any perception that we are gentrifying the City. A lot of people don't understand why we're switching from traditional public housing to these other different development styles. It's really important that we reassure residents that no one is losing their home or being displaced from their neighborhood."

On a personal level, Kanesha appreciates the fact that she is included in all conversations and discussions about every aspect of a project as well as having an organization that believes in her.

"It was exciting to find a place where I felt like I could grow and be part of a leadership team that really cares about the people we serve," she said. "I think it's going to be a whole new world for ARHA as far as what our properties look like in many good ways."



UPDATES FROM HUMAN RESOURCES

ARHA's COVID-19 POLICY

Effective October 1, we required all employees to provide proof of COVID-19 vaccination or submit a weekly COVID test result. This policy decision is in alignment with President's Executive Order requiring vaccinations for Federal Employees. At this time, we are not mandating that staff get the vaccination; however, we continue to encourage staff to get vaccinated. Staff wishing to get their vaccinations in Alexandria can log on to: COVID-19 Vaccines | City of Alexandria, VA (alexandriava.gov)

We are continuing to enforce the policy that everyone is to be masked in public areas of the building and socially distance by at least 3-feet. Masks and other personal protective equipment is provided to all staff and visitors upon request.

STAFF NEWS @ ARHA



We are happy to welcome to the ARHA team Pamela Guerra (pictured left) as the new Senior Center Program Manager at the Charles Houston Recreation Center.

In November, we bid a fond farewell to Vanessa Greene (below left) who retired to travel and spend more time with family and friends. She was a major advocate for the Senior Center at Charles Houston and served as the Program Director for over 30 years.

In December, we bid a fond farewell to Quang Truong (below right) who served ARHA for over 20 years on the Facilities and Maintenance team in the position of Modernization Technician. Quang plans to move closer to his adult children and to spend grandchildren more time with them.



CARTER FLEMMING – THANK YOU FOR 20 YEARS OF SERVICE

Carter Fleming joined the ARHA Board of Commissioners in October 2001, with her primary focus on residents, especially seniors. Now she has stepped down after 20 years of service.



Fleming was volunteering with the Red Cross in 2001, in a program called Friendly Visitors, in which she and others visited seniors at ARHA's Ladrey High Rise. Conditions at Ladrey were a far cry from what they are today. Fleming advocated for change, and as part of that, she applied for and was appointed to a seat of the Board.

"I wanted to try to help empower seniors to speak up for themselves and hold ARHA to a higher standard than we had back at the time, in terms of building maintenance and responsiveness to tenant requests," she said. "We worked through those issues over the years and ARHA has become much more responsive to all of the tenants, but most especially to our seniors. I'm proud of ARHA and the work it has done to raise that standard."

Fleming is quick to say she is not taking credit for the changes and that it was an evolutionary process. She does credit the current administration with taking conditions to a new level.

"Mr. Pettigrew is holding his staff to a high standard of responsiveness and has worked hard to train the staff on how to deal with seniors and how to be more understanding and get them the help they need to comply with things," she said.

Getting to know those seniors over the years forms Fleming's fondest memories.

"It's been a great blessing in my life. I admire so many of them. "They have overcome so many obstacles in their lives and have such a positive attitude in spite of the hardships that many of them have experienced." Those friendships and that mutual understanding have really meant a great deal to me."

Fleming concedes she is not a housing expert but has been happy to work alongside board members who do have that expertise.

"I am extremely proud of the work ARHA has done over these 20 years in redeveloping so many of our properties and improving the quality of life for so many of our residents," she said. "I know they have a lot of projects ahead that will transform more lives and more of our aging properties, and so I think anybody who knows anything about housing should be very proud of the work ARHA has accomplished. I know people from all over the country come to tour some of our communities and they can't believe that there is actual public housing included in these developments."

She points to Old Town Commons where visitors can't tell the difference between the houses of public housing residents and other houses in the development. She called that a success story for residents who are benefiting from that kind of transformation.

Fleming has devoted her adult life to doing volunteer work in Alexandria and considers herself to be fortunate to be able to do that.

"I've always felt it's a responsibility for people to give back to their community and that is what I have tried to do with my life," she said. "I have been privileged to work with multiple organizations in multiple capacities and it has been so rewarding and I've learned so much about so many different things."

Fleming won't be taking it too easy anytime soon. She serves as president of her civic association and is the rising chair of the Alexandria Federation of Civic Associations.

"I will continue to do my volunteer work and try to give people a voice in civic things, community things, so I'm not worried about being bored," she said. "I will miss my connection to ARHA, both the staff, the tenants, and my fellow board commissioners. It's been a great privilege to be allowed to serve for as long as I have."

Finally, she said, she will always be engaged in the ARHA community.

"I have that commitment, and it doesn't end just because a piece of paper says your term is over."



ALEXANDRIA SEAPORT FOUNDATION – NOT JUST BUILDING BOATS

ARHA has been working with the Alexandria Seaport Foundation (ASF) to identify and offer young people ages 17-23, an opportunity to enroll in their Apprentice Program. Although the Seaport Foundation has traditionally focused on lessons in history, community, and seamanship, they realized their program could also be a unique opportunity to provide a life-changing, hands-on experience that teaches technical skills and personal habits which are needed for success in employment and adulthood.

The Apprentice Program is geared for young people in need of confidence, and in some cases, a new direction for their lives. The apprentices work alongside experienced carpenters, woodworkers, and mentors who challenge them every day, but they don't just learn about building boats. The curriculum also provides instruction in:

- Applied Math – measurement, estimation, and everyday math skills
- GED Preparation – tutoring and test preparation in all subject areas for those without a high school diploma
- Personal Finance and Budgeting
- Personal Skills – communicating effectively, speaking with confidence, and time management
- Job skills – critical thinking and teamwork
- Resumé Writing and Interviewing, and
- Life Skills – how to navigate government, health, and social service systems; how to be responsible for themselves, their decisions, and their families



Additionally, the apprentices earn a \$250 stipend during the four-week trial period and are paid \$14 an hour throughout the duration of the program. Tania Findley is 18 years old and excited to be part of the ASF's Apprenticeship Program. She feels that it is a great alternative for individuals who don't want to go the route of a traditional college program. For her, it is also an opportunity to earn her GED and figure out a career path for herself.

The Apprentice Program accepts applications on a rolling basis. For more information, email Joy Stevenson at stevenson@alexandriaseaport.org or call the Alexandria Seaport Foundation office at 703-778-0977.

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

Candice Drayton – IT Help Desk (and Artist)



When your computer isn't doing what it's supposed to do, who're you gonna call? At ARHA, it's Candice Drayton. As manager of the IT Help Desk, Candice deals with big problems like the Internet going down for the whole agency or the servers not working to small problems like people not being able to connect to the Internet or having issues with their phones.

Candice planned for a career in art, earning her bachelor's degree in visual arts from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in 2019. And she still loves art. In fact, she designs this newsletter, prepares slide shows and dabbles on projects with her friends. But working on computers got a hold of her and she can't let go.

"I just happen to be really good at fixing computers," she said. "My sister used to break the computer a lot when we were kids so my uncle who worked in IT would come over and fix it. I would watch him do it and just got the hang of it by the time I was a teenager."

While still in high school, Candice joined ARHA's internship program and stayed with the agency all the way through college; and now she has been more than two years full-time at the help desk. She has watched technology evolve over those years at ARHA.

"In the past few years, seeing the phones go from one model to another and another in about five years and to see the advancements is just crazy," she said. "It's interesting to see people who have been with a certain phone, and we give them a new one and see how they adapt to it. People don't seem to have as much resistance to technology as they used to. I see my coworkers play around and find features I didn't even know were on the phone."

The pandemic led to employees getting comfortable with new computers in that they were able to take their old computers home to work remotely, but returned to new computers when they came into the office.

"Some employees wanted to continue to work on their old computers and really didn't want to change. But then when they came back to the office, they have the newer computers, and they realize the computers really aren't that different. The new ones just look prettier," she said.

Before the pandemic, Candice would routinely visit the computer centers at three sites: Ruby Tucker, Ladrey Highrise and Princess Square to fix issues residents may have. At this point, she says most of the residents know her, although she said some did a doubletake with her new, short haircut.

At Ruby Tucker, students do their homework or play educational games in the computer room. She particularly enjoys interacting with them. "The kids really like watching me do my job."

As for her future, she says she can't imagine working in a more supportive environment than at ARHA.

"I've been working here since high school. I came back every year. I really enjoyed it. I love the people I work with and help, and our residents. And, I really like helping keep residents informed about things that we're doing."

