

City housing agency gets good report card

ANN BAKER STAFF WRITER

St. Paul's Public Housing Agency was ranked fifth among the 3,300 public housing services across the United States. Its annual report card came last week from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"I think it has to do with our staff and the systems we have in place," said executive director Jon Gutzmann when asked the secret of his agency's success.

"They're the hardest working and most competent group of people with whom I've ever worked. We're a tenant-centered organization, and the staff are grounded by their daily involvement with the successes and failures of our residents."

Public housing in St. Paul provides a staff of 240 to oversee 2,400 publicly owned housing units in four large complexes — McDonough, Mount Airy, Roosevelt and Dunedin homes; 16 high rises for seniors and handicapped people and more than 300 houses and duplexes scattered throughout the city.

The agency also oversees 2,800 Section 8 grants, which are federal subsidies that allow low-income people to pay no more than a third of their monthly income on rent in privately owned buildings.

The St. Paul agency provides numerous services for its residents, typically in collaboration with other local agencies. They include:

■ A Community Outreach Police (ACOP),

which uses \$800,000 in drug-prevention federal grants to pay salaries of city police officers and support staff in the four large family housing complexes.

■ Youth sports programs, including \$124,000 to help open a Boys and Girls Club at Mt. Airy, where the community center also is being renovated. It will reopen in November.

■ Head Start preschools, well-baby clinics, food shelves, counseling, job hunting programs and nutrition classes at McDonough, Mt. Airy and Roosevelt. Residents of Dunedin are encouraged to use similar services at the adjacent Neighborhood House.

"We're focused on a specific mission: provid-

AGENCY CONTINUED ON 2 ▶

AGENCY

▼ CONTINUED FROM 1

ing safe and affordable housing," Gutzmann said.

"But in doing that well, we are an anchor in many areas of the city. We're able to bring additional federal resources to the city and build community centers, help provide community policing and help provide services that help residents move up and out," he added.

St. Paul's good rating comes at a time when public housing agencies in Philadelphia, Kansas City and other cities have been so troubled by vandalism and related problems that federal courts have stepped in to take them over.

But Gutzmann said his agency's high marks resulted more from hard work than from being in a less troubled urban zone.

"I think it comes down to staff

and management and systems," he said.

Staff members are asked to meet high standards.

Caretakers are expected to get vacant units ready for new occupants in four days or less and to answer maintenance emergencies within 24 hours.

Housing managers inspect the grounds monthly at the high rises and family complexes, five times a year at scattered sites.

Staff of the resident services department are expected to reach 99 percent occupancy, while carefully screening tenants, inspecting units annually and attending meetings of the 23 resident councils.

The operations and finance department draws up budgets two years in advance, while attending to employee safety issues and promotional opportunities.

In the coming year, the agency hopes to provide more Section 8 certificates, also to help homeless people find a variety of places to live.

Note:

This article inaccurately reported the number of units owned and operated by the Saint Paul PHA. The agency owns and operates 4,281 units of public housing including 16 hit-rises, four family rowhouse developments and 421 scattered site units.