

Home Improvements

Driving through Roosevelt Homes on St. Paul's East Side is one of the unremarkable routines of Donna Rose's day.

The assistant manager winds her car slowly among the curving streets and parking lots of the sprawling public housing project, looking for graffiti and junker cars, torn screens and people she doesn't recognize.

This particular morning, Rose found broken furniture left by a tenant who had moved. By 8:30 a.m., she had it carted off by maintenance and had made plans to deduct the cost of disposal from the tenant's security deposit.

"The outside appearance, building and grounds, say a lot," says Rose. "If you let it go, it just seems to deteriorate a neighborhood. People lose pride in where they're living."

Such diligent attention to detail has helped St. Paul's Public Housing Agency earn high marks from the federal Housing and Urban Development Department, the highest marks, in fact, among the nation's 40 largest housing agencies.

Had Rose spotted a junker this morning, she'd have asked police to tag and tow it. Graffiti would be reported on "a top-priority work order" because "that works real well — they know if they put it up, it comes right off." Tenants who have an unusual amount of traffic into their apartments are called in for questions. And tenants with broken screens are told to take them to maintenance for repair.

Firmness is paired with a helping hand for tenants who falter. When a child damaged property and provoked fights, for example, the project's human services coordinator called in his parents and told them to get counseling or risk eviction. When an elderly Hmong woman failed a housekeeping inspection, the coordinator found that the tenant had been ill, as was the woman who'd been cleaning her apartment through a subsidized service.

The coordinator arranged for a Hmong social service agency to help the woman find another cleaning person. She also got the woman's daughter to ensure that

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the work got done. Finally, the tenant signed an agreement allowing Rose to check the housekeeping every two months.

"They will stay in touch. They don't just put a family in and walk away," says Al Hester, assistant to the Public Housing Agency's executive director.

In Hester's view, his agency's success stems from steady commitment to the basics of property management: rigorous screening of tenants, annual housekeeping and maintenance inspections of each of 4,300 units, daily checks like Rose's and prompt attention to problems.



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Donna Rose checks the grounds of the Roosevelt Homes public housing complex on the East Side daily. The diligence and quick action by Rose and other workers are key to the St. Paul Public Housing Agency's high marks.

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The benefits are apparent in the two-story stucco buildings of Roosevelt Homes. Some 314 families live in these apartments, which have the orderly, bland look of military housing and none of the decay often associated with public housing. In the year ended March 31, there were only six evictions from Roosevelt for reasons other than nonpayment of rent, and only 30 for all St. Paul Public Housing Agency units. Hester believes the low vacancy shows the effectiveness of the agency's screening and management practices.

Hester also believes that as an independent agency, separate from the rest of city government, the Public Housing Agency has avoided political patronage that has protected incompetence in housing authorities in other cities. In fact, executive director Jon Gutzmann is on a team helping housing agencies in Detroit and Chicago dig out from years of neglect and mismanagement.

The process in St. Paul begins at the Public Housing Agency's downtown headquarters, with a tough screening of applicants. Interviewers check criminal, credit and rental records back five years and require references from former landlords. Once the applicants are screened and the file sent to Rose, she can request further checks if she sees something of concern. Of 1,635 people interviewed for spots in public housing during the year ended March 31,

320 were denied and 679 placed in housing.

Moreover, St. Paul has for several years been using a policy that Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros is advocating nationally — eviction of tenants strongly suspected of criminal activity, even if they haven't been convicted of a crime.

Public Housing Agency officials say the policy is important for preventing drug dealers from getting a foothold in a project. But Cathy Royce, director of the Community Stabilization Project, a low-income tenants' group that works in St. Paul's central city neighborhoods, objects to eviction without conviction. "We would have serious problems with that. They're infringing on people's rights."

Federal budget cuts are making management tougher, Hester says. Last fall, 12 positions were cut from the agency's headquarters. Thus far, maintenance jobs and front-line housing management jobs have been protected.

Meanwhile, at Roosevelt Homes, the daily business of managing goes on. Donna Rose is finishing her rounds. And just ahead, a maintenance worker stops his truck and steps out to pick up some trash.

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