

President's Forum: Thank You for the Honor

This is my final column as PHADA's President. I have been honored to serve in this capacity and, God willing, will continue to be involved in the association's affairs well into the future. In a moment, I would like to acknowledge some of the people who have helped me lead this great association the last two years. First, though, I would like to focus on some of the notable developments during my tenure.

In response to many external factors facing our industry, most of PHADA's focus the last two years has been on legislation, regulatory and budget concerns. Adequate funding for our programs remains PHADA's number one priority – and our most significant challenge. Just recently, we achieved some degree of success, helping to secure an additional \$300 million in operating funding from the new Congress that took office in January. Even with this positive development, the operating fund proration went from a perilously low sum of 76 percent to just about 83 percent. The FY 2007 Joint Funding Resolution also protected capital funds and HOPE VI from reductions. It also significantly increased Housing Choice Voucher funds. Still, we have a long way to go; HUD's FY 2008 proposed budget includes a \$1 billion operating fund shortfall.

On the legislative front, I am proud the association continues to lead the industry on the push for meaningful rent simplification. PHADA is working closely with Representatives Barney Frank (D-MA) and Maxine Waters (D-CA) to further improve their legislation, which would remove much of the red tape in the rent calculation process. HR 1851 would also eliminate temporary income disallowances and replace them with a much simpler system. While more work still needs to be done, the legislation would help remove work disincentives by creating a new earned income deduction. /p>

Our rent reform efforts are not limited to Congress. PHADA staff recently met with officials from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the HUD leadership to discuss rent reform. HUD is likely to use several of PHADA's recommendations when it releases a new rent proposal as part of its next budget. During the discussion, OMB and HUD lauded PHADA for our creative work on rent simplification, noting they frequently consult PHADA's publication, *Rent Reform: Fair and Simple Solutions*, for ideas. (We have been told that this ranks among the best of PHADA's many notable publications over the years.)

In other key program areas, we are continuing to work for an expansion of the successful Moving to Work (MTW) program. Our incoming Senior and Legislation Committee Vice Presidents, Curt Hiebert (Keene, NH) and Greg Russ (Cambridge, MA), respectively, are leading discussions with advocates to work out a compromise that will we hope will help move legislation forward. PHADA has also helped fight off administration efforts to terminate the HOPE VI program. During the last session, we helped secure legislation to reauthorize the program for another year.

We have spent a lot of time the last two years on asset management, which I believe is one of the most revolutionary concepts the industry has faced in many years. Again, I am proud that PHADA has taken a leadership role on such a critical issue. When I first took office in mid-2005, PHADA was the lone industry group calling for a delay in the implementation of the new operating fund rule and HUD's asset management plans. We took this position because it was obvious HUD was not ready to move forward, and it would have caused huge problem for HAs had the Department done so. HUD ultimately agreed and did delay implementation at that time.

We have published two comprehensive asset management publications pointing out the many flaws in HUD's approach. At the same time, PHADA has spelled out how we would correct those flaws. While the asset management debate with HUD has been sometimes torturous, I believe we have made some progress. HUD has made recent some modifications in its guidance - changes that, in several instances, were prompted by PHADA's comments and input. PHADA has also worked successfully to get Congress to intervene. Both chambers are now fully engaged as evidenced by the Senate's recent oversight roundtable and a similar session that will be held in the House of Representatives next month. These congressional forums are very helpful in that they give us an opportunity to highlight the problems with HUD's micromanagement. They may also lead to a legislative solution on Capitol Hill, which is another top PHADA priority.

The most dramatic and serious low-income housing problem during the last two years took place in the Gulf Coast. If only briefly, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath shined a bright light on poverty problems facing this country. PHADA played a small part to help confront the tragedy. Since Katrina hit, we have worked with HUD and others in the gulf region to provide HAs with the information they need to house displaced families. We also advocated for, and helped secure, additional funding for both the HAs and low-income families impacted by the disaster. More still needs to be done and I am sure the new PHADA leadership team will continue to work for funding that can be dispatched to the area.

I see some hope for progress on the regulatory front. For quite some time, PHADA has been pushing the Department to deregulate public housing. To its credit, HUD recently announced a new initiative that will hopefully lead to meaningful change. The Department will soon convene works groups to deregulate the program in 10 key operational areas. PHADA also suggested several recommendations on compliance and statutory and regulatory matters in correspondence we sent to HUD and Congress last December. In a similar vein, HUD has instituted regulatory waiver opportunities, an idea that was first put forward by two of our own Trustees, Greg Russ and Ann Lott (Dallas, TX).

From an organizational standpoint, the association is in strong financial shape, which is the result of the terrific membership support (much appreciated) and the work of others including our Finance Committee led by our able Treasurer, DeWitt Boosel (Mercer County, PA). I believe one of the key reasons members continue to support PHADA is due to the excellent work the organization is doing to represent our interests. Indeed, one of the things I am most proud of is the extremely high satisfaction rate evidenced by our last membership survey. As I reported in this column last October, an incredible 99 percent of our members believe PHADA is doing an excellent or satisfactory job. Members are also very pleased with our communications and this publication, in particular.

On a sadder note, we lost two people who are very important in PHADA's history. Former President Floyd Carter died in car accident in late 2005 and the association's long-time Membership Director, Judy Browne, passed way last summer after a battle with cancer. Both of these individuals will not be forgotten for the many contributions to PHADA's success over the years.

So many wonderful people have helped me over these past two years, beginning with our dedicated "Alabama Contingent" of Trustees (Dave Madden, David Jackson and Joe Alexander), and Alabama colleagues Jill West and Lloyd Strickland, who contributed time and talent in hosting the PHADA Trustee strategic plan retreat in Montgomery, Alabama in November of 2005. In addition to mapping our Association's direction for the future, our time together included memorable experiences at the Rosa Parks Museum, the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, and the Civil Rights Memorial Center. This experience also inspired PHADA to establish a Rosa Parks Scholarship program.

I want to thank all the new and renewing members of PHADA (including a special thanks to the 14 new PHADA members from my state of Minnesota who 'just happened' to join PHADA during my tenure as President!) Members remain the focus and heart of this organization. Our job is to represent and serve you as best as we can. Our primary "representative" body at your service is the membership-elected Board of Trustees. My thanks to this incredibly talented and energetic group of 50 Executive Directors from all parts of the country who so ably guide and shape PHADA's policy initiatives.

My special thanks to the Board of Trustees' Executive Committee with whom I have forged the closest bond over many a conference call or late night meeting. The members of the Executive Committee are J. Richard Parker II, our Immediate Past President and my friend and visionary mentor in this position; John Johnson, our very capable and likeable new PHADA President; Vice President for Legislation and incoming Senior Vice President, Curt Hiebert; Treasurer, DeWitt Boosel; Vice President for Professional Development, Stephanie Cowart; Vice President for Housing, John Harmon; Secretary, Paula Ledford; Vice President for Membership Services, Sheri Lee; Sergeant at Arms, Richard Murray; and Parliamentarian, Nancy Walker. You rock!

Another special thanks to that small "fraternity" of Past Presidents I am about to join, especially Dave Morton, Rick Parker, Dave Madden and Bob Neill. And I know they will join me in advocating for and helping elect PHADA's first female President someday...sooner rather than later we hope.

Thanks to the Board of Commissioners of my employer, the St. Paul Public Housing Agency, for allowing me time away from the office to conduct PHADA business and for encouraging and supporting my participation in the national policy setting arena all these years. Thanks to my incredible staff at the St. Paul PHA for picking up the "slack back home" when I was traveling on PHADA business. They remain the

reason our PHA succeeds in fulfilling our mission to the 20,000 public housing and Section 8 residents in St. Paul, despite years of under-funding and micromanagement by HUD.

And most importantly, my sincere thanks to the hard working and talented PHADA staff: Ted Van Dyke, Jim Armstrong, Kathleen Whalen, Tracey Messina, Godfrey Swindell, Norma Bellew, Yaniv Goury, Gwen Lyda, and our fantastic Executive Director, Tim Kaiser. Tim in particular has been there for me every step of the way these past two years. Tim is a committed, compassionate, clear-eyed leader who has the energy, focus, and drive to continue leading PHADA well into the future. PHADA is very fortunate to have the best Executive Director in the industry. Thanks Tim!

To borrow a closing quote from another Minnesotan, Garrison Keillor: "Be well, do good work, and stay in touch." ■

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