DENVER HOUSING AUTHORITY

A State-Wide Context of Affordable Housing in Colorado

Affordable housing initiatives in Colorado were directly impacted by federal programs. The need for a statewide housing initiative was made clear by the early 20th century as the state's population grew. Urban and rural areas lacked decent affordable housing for residents and migrant workers. Denver and the surrounding area experienced seasonal spikes in housing needs due to the influx of farm laborers to work in the sugar beet fields. Every year, the beet fields employed over 20,000 people, with numbers rising to 25,000 in peak years. Some of these migrant workers lived in "colonies" built by the farm they worked for, but there was still a need for more affordable housing.

The New Deal in Colorado

Although relief in affordable housing was slow in the early 20th century, Roosevelt's New Deal programs significantly impacted Colorado between 1933 and 1939. Colorado received the 10th-most funding from New Deal programs. Not only did this funding provide jobs to out-of-work Coloradoans, but it also funded the construction of affordable housing across the state.

Colorado's Housing Authorities

Dozens of communities in Colorado established housing authorities after the passing of the United States Housing Act in 1937. These authorities allowed communities to gain access to federal funds for constructing housing complexes.

One of Colorado's earliest housing projects was Denver's 1938 Lincoln Park Homes. DHA acquired federal funds for this project, which was a typical 1930s affordable housing complex. Most early affordable housing developments were clusters of low- and high-rise apartment buildings or rowhouses arranged around open spaces with parking along the edge of the complex. These designs created "super blocks" inside existing city grids, setting these complexes apart from the surrounding community and leading to the stigma attached to living in "the projects." Lincoln Park Homes, which was demolished in 1994, reflects this typical design and featured long rows of 2- 3-story apartment buildings centered along pedestrian walkways. The buildings faced inward, away from the surrounding streets.

Image 10: The Historic American Building Survey (HABS) documented the Lincoln Park Homes project before it was demolished in 1994. HABS is a program of the National Park Service that documents buildings and places important to American history. Lincoln Park Homes was documented because it was one of Colorado's earliest housing projects. Photo c.1990. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS, CO-74.

Historians noted that Colorado's affordable housing leaders considered the needs of the state's minority communities when developing its early housing plans. For example, a 1939 report of the Colorado Housing Committee identified four distinct groups in Denver with unique housing requirements, which were determined by their socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic backgrounds. The groups identified included unemployed people living in slums who were unable to afford even the lowest rents, blue-collar workers whose earnings were deemed too high for government housing and too low for market-rate rentals, minority groups (mainly Black and Hispanic people), and migrant workers. DHA understood that the unique circumstances of these diverse groups necessitated a housing program in Colorado that catered to their needs.

Colorado's Fair Housing Act

In the 1950s, state legislation impacted affordable housing in Colorado which would serve as a national example for quality housing solutions. Specifically, Colorado passed its own version of the Fair Housing Act (House Bill 259) in 1959. Colorado's legislation was ahead of its time given that this landmark anti-discrimination in housing law was passed 9 years before the federal government followed suit with the U.S. Fair Housing Act. The purpose of House Bill 259 was to prevent discrimination in housing based on a protected status. When the initial legislation was enacted in Colorado in 1959, the protected classifications included race, creed, color, and national origin or ancestry. The Fair Housing Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on April 11, 1968. The national legislation mimicked the spirit of the law that Coloradoans already followed for almost a decade.

The Colorado Housing Authority

During the 1960s, Coloradoans discussed the need for a state-wide housing authority in addition to the many local authorities that already existed. The discussion was primarily led by Senator George Brown of Denver who pushed for the creation of a state-wide authority that could issue bonds to finance housing for low-income households.

Brown also understood that despite the Fair Housing Act, minority groups in Colorado were not receiving equal treatment when renting and purchasing homes. He advocated for the state housing authority to issue fines related to unfair housing practices brought to the attention of Colorado's Civil Rights Commission.

After much debate among state leaders, the Colorado Housing Authority was established in 1974 after the passing of the federal Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. This legislation authorized HUD to provide grants to states and local communities for qualified community development programs for low- and moderate-income families. The CHA also issued low-interest mortgages for these development programs.

Affordable Housing in Colorado: The 1970s to Today

In the 1970s, Colorado faced another significant housing crisis due to high interest rates, land prices, and construction costs. In Denver, the rate of new home construction was among the worst in the country. Housing authorities across the state responded by continuing to evolve their practices to best serve their local communities.

By the 1970s, many of Colorado's housing authorities shifted from the initial construction of large housing projects to the rehabilitation of existing structures. Additionally, these authorities began constructing single-family homes, semi-detached homes, and rowhouses. Housing authorities also began to initiate programs aimed to assist with home counseling and low-interest mortgage assistance. Through these efforts, housing authorities combatted the problem of affordability by providing community members with financial tools and subsidized housing.

Image 11: DHA manages single-family homes in neighborhoods across Denver, like this house in the Harvey Park area. Photo c.2021. Credit: Denver Housing Authority