



DENVER HOUSING AUTHORITY

Affordable Housing in Denver

Since the turn of the 20th century, Denver experienced a need for affordable housing. The city grew immensely between the 1890s and 1920s, resulting in the creation of affluent neighborhoods like Cherry Creek, Country Club, Montclair, and University Heights along the edge of Denver. As a result, the city incorporated an additional 42 square miles between 1893 and 1902. The number of immigrants moving to Denver also increased during this time with many newcomers from Scandinavia, Germany, Eastern Europe, and Italy. This influx of people caused an affordable housing shortage that continues to this day.

Denver Housing Authority

Denver's affordable housing crisis improved in 1938 when the City Council passed an ordinance to create the Denver Housing Authority. DHA's goals were to eliminate slums and construct new and modern housing for low-income families. At the time, slum removal was frequently coupled with new construction in cities across the U.S. due to federal funding structures. After selecting a director, DHA also put together a "Slum Committee" to help plan for blight removal. The committee included a real estate dealer, the Director of Denver's Catholic Charities, a public school teacher, and other community leaders.

The formation of the authority initially faced public backlash. Some of Denver's residents initially questioned the constitutionality of DHA, but the Colorado Supreme Court upheld DHA's right to use public funds for affordable housing purposes. Additionally, some real estate brokers and landlords objected to DHA arguing that public support for these projects would negatively impact the private sector. Regardless of these early objections, DHA took no delays in planning projects and seeking funding.

DHA's Early Housing Projects

In the 1940s, DHA received its first U.S. Housing Authority grant of \$3 million to clear blighted blocks and replace them with three new housing complexes. Not only did the project provide housing, but it also employed between an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 individuals.

DHA's new housing program included consideration for minority housing. Although not particularly progressive by today's standards, DHA and the Colorado Housing Committee

accounted for the needs of growing minority communities when creating housing designs. For example, in its 1939 report, the Colorado Housing Committee identified four demographic subsets in Denver with distinct housing requirements based on race, income, and other factors. People who fell into these categories included the unemployed ("slum dwellers") who couldn't afford even the cheapest rents, blue-collar employees whose wages were too high for government housing but too low for ordinary rentals, minority groups, and migrant workers.

As a result, DHA prioritized the needs of these underrepresented communities in its search for new home locations. In February 1939, the *Rocky Mountain News* reported on the city's plans to construct three new housing developments that would be primarily occupied by different racial groups. Although DHA's early housing programs did not aim to promote integration, they did aim to provide Denver's minorities with better housing options.

One of DHA's first developments was Lincoln Park Homes, which was also one of the earliest subsidized housing projects in the state of Colorado. The complex was located in Denver's historic La Alma/Lincoln Park district, and the design attempted to provide safe, well-maintained apartments for the modern working class. DHA chose Temple Buell, a prominent local architect, to design the complex. The project was intended to fill the gaps in affordable housing in the city, particularly for defense workers. The original complex was demolished in 1994 and redeveloped as part of a HOPE VI project.

Construction of affordable housing continued into the 1940s. In 1944, DHA issued the largest affordable housing bond (\$1.41 million) in the United States among other housing authorities.

Early affordable housing projects in Denver were not restricted to blight removal and new construction. DHA also worked with residents to repair sub-standard homes to increase the overall quality of the local housing stock.



Image 12: Over the decades, DHA has acquired and rehabilitated many single- and multi-family homes to improve the overall quality of life in Denver's neighborhoods, such as this duplex in the Hale neighborhood. Photo c.2021. Credit: Denver Housing Authority.

Affordable Housing after WWII

After WWII, DHA conducted housing surveys across the county to determine the area's housing needs. The surveys identified that as veterans returned home from the war and started families, Denver's affordable housing stock could not keep pace with the population growth. During this period, the construction of new homes underwent delays due to a lack of building materials. However, DHA continued to help with home improvement and built thousands of additional affordable housing units for 15,000 people.

Dedicated Senior Housing

The percentage of seniors in the overall US population increased in the 1950s through 1970s, resulting in many seniors enduring long waiting lists for affordable housing. In response, DHA built several complexes intended for senior living with amenities suited to their specific needs.

A New Plan: Scattered Sites of Affordable Housing

In the 1960s and 1970s, DHA embarked on a new plan to construct, acquire, and rehabilitate scattered sites of affordable housing throughout the county. DHA bought and rehabilitated several historic buildings in older neighborhoods, helping to revitalize distressed communities. Many of the new structures were single-family homes and duplexes that matched the quality and style of surrounding neighborhoods.



Image 13: DHA has purchased many homes in historic neighborhoods, like this Tudor Revival in Park Hill, and now rents them as affordable units. Photo

c.2021. Credit: Denver Housing Authority.

In 1972, HUD selected Denver as a "Rehabilitation City" and provided DHA with the funds to rehabilitate up to 1,000 units a year. These rehabilitations were part of Denver's "assault for

new and rehabilitated housing,” as reported by the *Rocky Mountain News* in 1975. The Las Casitas homes were one of the rehabilitations that received funding from this period.

Still, the city lacked affordable housing stock, especially in the late 1970s. Many of Denver’s developers were converting apartments to market-rate condominiums, forcing people out of affordable housing. This trend particularly impacted low-income families and seniors, resulting in long waiting lists for affording housing units.

Building Up the Denver Community

Starting in the 1970s, DHA started to establish programs that worked to build up the communities impacted by their developments. For example, DHA created leadership opportunities for residents through resident councils for housing complexes. Furthermore, DHA provided homeownership counseling services for families to understand the financial literacy needed to purchase their own homes.

DHA also led conversations about promoting racial integration in the 1980s. This was a result of the organization’s examination of the impact of relocating housing for low-income families from predominately minority neighborhoods to other neighborhoods with mostly white residents.

In the mid-1990s, DHA’s work shifted in response to the national HOPE VI funding. DHA and the City and County of Denver collaborated on housing programs to make a bigger impact with their available funding.

Affordable Housing in Denver Today

DHA now prioritizes creating mixed-income neighborhoods across the City and County of Denver. Through this initiative, DHA hopes to grow stronger communities and better local options for affordable housing.