

CURB APPEAL CASE STUDY

KING COUNTY, WASHINGTON

The King County Housing Authority (KCHA) is the local public housing agency (PHA) for the county surrounding Seattle, WA. It manages 74 properties consisting of 2,288 units of low-income public housing and 1,407 units of project-based Section 8. KCHA also owns an additional roughly 6,000 units in 41 developments of other affordable housing, including tax credits.

We caught up with Mike Reilly and Bill Cook, KCHA's senior director of housing management and director of property management, respectively, to talk about their take on curb appeal.

Question: Your projects, in short, look marvelous. Indeed, you may be the public housing gold standard for curb appeal. Tell us about the King County story!

First, thanks. We indeed take a lot of pride in how our properties look. I guess what everyone has to understand is that there are lots of big and small things going on here.

- Of course, the climate helps. The amount of precipitation helps keep our lawns green (and without the need for irrigation), but it also makes it easier to maintain plantings and other landscape features.
- It also helps that much of our inventory was built between 1965 and 1980. As such, our physical stock doesn't tend to have that institutional look to it. Our product tends to blend in more with other multifamily products in the local market. One of the



Birch Creek Apartments

things that we have really stressed is upgrading our properties and units using tax credit dollars, especially the building envelopes and systems. Also, we have learned from the private sector that it is much more cost effective to upgrade unit interiors upon unit turn, rather than doing the traditional Public Housing method of emptying all units and hiring a contractor to complete all of the units at once. By using this method, we save the costs of the contractor's profit and resident relocation.

Now, that being said, curb appeal has been important to the mission of the KCHA for as far back as we can remember. We really work hard at it, but in a good way! We do have an extensive inspection protocol that we follow to make sure the properties are maintained at a high level. Once again, we learned this

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from a local management company. Our property managers perform weekly inspections. Their regional managers also spot-check these inspections as well as performing their own. Lastly, our director of property management conducts a weekly inspection. Collectively, these inspections help us to make certain our properties meet Real Estate Assessment Center (REAC) standards – keeping them in “REAC-ready” condition and keeping all of our staff on their toes.



Glenview Heights

percent score or better on each inspection. Interestingly enough, our management team’s departmental goal is 97 percent!

“REAC-ready” condition and keeping all of our staff on their toes.

We try to have our properties look as good, or better, than anything in the neighborhood – or at least not call any (negative) attention to ourselves. We have built into the culture of KCHA the goal of having the best-looking properties in the neighborhood.

We believe that the REAC inspection system, although not perfect, is an effective tool for evaluating the condition of properties. We have an organizational goal of achieving a 92

Question: Any other key management decisions that have helped you get the results you’re looking for?

Several years back, we decentralized our management and maintenance operations. We were always a high performer, but by decentralizing we actually were able to kick it up a notch. We became even more responsive and more attentive. We have found that, by going to the decentralized management system that is used by the majority of rental management companies across the nation, we have developed a greater sense of pride and ownership amongst our employees. And, because our site staff now has dedicated budgets, they are able to put savings back into the project. There’s an incentive to manage wisely. Higher service. Greater resident retention. Lower operating costs. More funds to invest in the properties. It all feeds off one another.

Some examples include giving property managers a \$1,000 curb appeal budget. This line item can be used for flowers, beauty bark and other items to enhance the curb appeal of the property. Staff have taken these extra funds and really made it into a competition between portfolios to make the biggest impact at their sites. We also have all new employees job shadow for the first month of employment with one of our outstanding employees.



Seola Crossing

It also helps that KCHA owns all of its non-public housing inventory. That product, though with rents below the market by a margin, is somewhat market-driven and, as a consequence, has to compete. Although we've always had long waiting lists for our public housing, and thus never had any problem filling units, we learned a lot from our affordable housing stock about what it takes to maintain good curb appeal and, more broadly, what good property management is all about. Out of necessity, we had to be much more attentive to curb appeal and customer service in our affordable housing stock, and that experience has now rubbed off on our property management operations. We found it effective to take our staff on tours of high performing properties so that our staff can see what the expectations are.



Eastbridge

Another initiative that we completed was hiring a botanist/arborist who coached us on taking care of our landscaping. We discovered that, with the new landscaping we were putting in at redeveloped sites, there were a variety of maintenance requirements that needed to be followed. This expert assisted us in developing a short, user-friendly landscape manual that covered all aspects of landscaping, including pruning. She was also on contract for a period of time to come out and assist site staff on more complex problems.

Question: Now that you've achieved this level of success, it is hard maintaining those standards?

Actually, no. The hard part was getting to this standard. Once we got here, it's actually easier to maintain – but only because our culture is so attentive to these standards.



Greenbridge

Question: Do you have anything today that doesn't meet your standard and, if so, what are your plans for it?

For the most part, our properties are now up to our standards. One other program we developed involves a staff person whose focus is on property upgrades that are too large for the site staff and too small for our Capital department. How this works is that a property manager will submit a request for a project in

this category such as asphalt repair. This position will then work with our task order contractors to accomplish the project. Some of these items are requested as a part of our annual budgeting process, and some of them just come up randomly. The key is directing the right resource for the type of job.

Question: If one of the “benefits” of your climate is the green lawns, is there a drawback? For example, do you have to cut the grass more frequently, or do you deal with mold issues? Any unique challenges?

Yes, the amount of rain we get really makes the grass grow. Quite often during the prime growing season, it needs to be cut twice a week. At KCHA, we hire nine summer helpers (and our goal is to hire residents). This is an effective way to provide job training to these employees and provides relief to our staff during the growing season.



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