

Organización Progresiva De San Elizario

Community Context

The Organización Progresiva de San Elizario provides services to colonias in San Elizario, Texas. San Elizario is a farming community in El Paso County. It is located 15 miles from downtown El Paso and one mile from Río Grande. Approximately 26 colonias and 15,000 people live in San Elizario. It has been experiencing both a rapid increase in its population and the outsourcing of its jobs to Mexico, resulting in a high unemployment rate. The 2000 Census reports that the median income in El Paso County is \$31,051, 23.8 percent of its residents live in poverty, and 9.5 percent are unemployed.

San Elizario's housing conditions reflect a similar trend experienced in colonia communities. One example is that developers purchase and parcel out farmland without developing the needed infrastructure. As a result, individuals locked out of the housing market purchase the land and construct housing units that do not have access to water, sewer systems, or roads. Some infrastructure development has been done in San Elizario colonias, but more work is needed. Compounding these issues is the poor quality of the housing structures developed on these lands. Due to limited resources and finances community residents begin to construct their homes using whatever materials they have access to, yet may never complete them.

The Organization

Organización Progresiva de San Elizario (OPSE) began as an informal neighborhood association in 1993 and became an incorporated non-profit in 1994. Antonio Araujo, OPSE's Executive Director, led and organized community members in their efforts to address political and educational neglect of the community, rapid population growth, lack of economic opportunity, health risks associated with poor sanitation and the absence of medical care, and inadequate housing stock. The organization's mission is to improve the quality of life by addressing issues of infrastructure and housing.

OPSE currently consists of four staff that oversee the organization's self-help and contract for deed conversion programs. Two consultants provide assistance with project planning and implementation, as well as grant writing. OPSE provides a range of housing programs for local residents, including:

- self-help housing program,
- homeowner rehabilitation loan program,
- contract for deed conversions,
- site acquisition,
- refinancing,
- pre- and post- buyer counseling, and
- infrastructure development .

In the past six years most of the organization's time has been invested in housing design and construction. Since its incorporation, OPSE has constructed a total of 40 energy-efficient adobe homes and provided the funding for the rehabilitation of 20 existing homes. OPSE recently began a pilot program with a local gas company providing natural gas services to colonia residents.

The Organization's Innovative Service

OPSE's innovative housing program focuses on the construction of solar passive energy-efficient adobe homes. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Rural Housing and Economic Development (HUD-RHED) has supported OPSE with close to \$1,000,000 in their efforts to build their organizational capacity and improve the quality of life in San Elizario through the construction of these energy-efficient homes. The funds have greatly contributed to the affordability of the homes by eliminating site acquisition and infrastructure development costs.

The University of Texas's Energy Center assisted OPSE in the pre-development process of the adobe homes. The Energy Center explains on their website that Energy Center personnel served as construction consultants teaching homeowners and construction supervisors the technical aspects of adobe construction. They

assisted with the design and energy efficient features of the homes.

The Energy Center's website also goes into some detail about the construction of the four adobe homes they helped to construct. They report that the homes are situated in a way that maximizes solar heat in the winter, and blocks higher rays in the summer. The adobe homes are constructed with bricks made of sand and clay (mud), which is poured into a rectangular wooden mold, removed almost immediately, and is left to dry for 2 to 3 days. As with concrete, the adobe bricks take approximately 30 days to fully cure. They can be stacked after one week.

OPSE has used the adobe method in conjunction with its self-help program. Groups that consist of four households contribute approximately 670 hours or 2/3 of the labor necessary to construct their homes. The construction process takes each building group approximately five months. When completed the homes consist of three bedrooms, two baths, measure 1,200 square feet, and total approximately \$35,000 in construction costs. The acquisition of developed lots with access to water and sewer in San Elizario averages \$18,000. OPSE subcontracts the electrical, plumbing, and heating ventilation of the homes.

OPSE ensures that homeowners are well informed about the homeownership process through their homebuyer education program, which requires that all participants attend homebuyer education and post-purchase workshops. The families are qualified for mortgages to purchase the homes through USDA/Rural Development 502 loans.

Organization's Resources

The majority of funding that OPSE has received has come from public sources. These public sources include, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). OPSE's work has also been supported by intermediary organizations, including the Housing

Assistance Council (HAC), and the Enterprise Foundation.

The organization has been able to use this funding to develop its organizational capacity and begin to impact the community both socially and economically. The following are the funding resources OPSE received, by year, in support of their housing development efforts.

- In 1997, the organization received a \$250,000 HOME grant from the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs. With this funding they were able to complete three new constructions and nine rehabilitation projects.
- In 1998, OPSE received a Rural Housing and Economic Development Innovative grant in the amount of \$400,000 to design solar passive energy efficient adobe subdivision residential housing.
- In 1999, the EPA provided \$138,000 in administrative funding to assist with the development of four adobe homes. Also in 1999, Under the Texas State Contract for Deed Initiative, OPSE received and used a \$416,000 to assist 21 families in converting their contracts for deed to more secure warranty deeds. Under this very initiative, OPSE completed the rehab work needed to bring six structures up to Colonia Housing Standards.
- In September 2001 OPSE, in collaboration with two other organizations, applied and received a capacity building grant in the amount of \$150,000 from RHED. OPSE was able to hire and provide the necessary training for a bookkeeper that is still with them today. OPSE has also received capacity building grants from the Enterprise Foundation and The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs to support its self-help program.
- In August 2002, OPSE received its first USDA 523 Self-Help Technical Assistance grant for \$239,000 to develop 15 adobe homes. That same year HAC supported OPSE's efforts with a grant in the amount

of \$111,000 to further subsidize the cost of the homes.

- The following year (2003) HUD-RHED awarded OPSE \$400,000 for the acquisition and development of infrastructure of subdivisions on which 24 homes will be constructed. In addition, HAC contributed \$161,000 in SHOP funds to assist with the acquisition of 16 scattered sites.

Program Outcomes

Community Impact. OPSE's services have introduced both social and economic benefits to the San Elizario community. The creation of the organization and its work has provided community members with job opportunities, homes, a more visually appealing environment, and improved living standards and quality of life over all. Families now have safe and comfortable homes to live in, which the Executive Director and Texas State Representative, Chente Quintanilla, believe have had a positive impact on the future community of San Elizario, its children. Mr. Quintanilla believes that as OPSE's capacity grows so will the organization's impact on the housing and economic conditions in San Elizario. Mr. Araujo is focused on developing OPSE's capacity so that they may be able to service San Elizario on a larger scale for years to come. His vision is for San Elizario to be a community where individuals of all income levels choose to reside.

Organizational Impact. OPSE's founder and Executive Director, Antonio Araujo, reported that the organization's accomplishments have not only served to improve the quality of life in San Elizario, but have also fueled the staff's commitment to the community to an even greater degree. As a result of HUD-RHED funding staff have been able to attend trainings and workshops to acquire the necessary skills and certifications. They are now better prepared to handle current and future work. OPSE would like to continue developing its capacity in order to diversify and increase the number of affordable homes they develop on an annual basis. OPSE looks forward to increasing the amount of housing units they develop over the next few years. The organization would like to build their

capacity so that they may be able to develop 100-150 units annually.

Lessons Learned

OPSE has proven to its funders that they can do the work they propose, and as a result have managed to establish a credible track record. OPSE's Executive Director reported that establishing the track record was one of the biggest challenges. Convincing funders that they could do the job, complying with report standards set forth by funders, and building what they set out to was all part of the process. He estimates that it took them two to three years to begin establishing themselves as a credible organization.

Mr. Araujo would offer the following advice to other community leaders, residents, and/or organizations attempting similar efforts: have the passion, dedication, and vision to change and improve your community's quality of life. He explained that a clear vision and mission in combination with a great deal of passion is needed to be able to see things through. If people "buy into" your vision, your organization will be able to improve the community's living standards and overall quality of life. He deems networking and the identification of quality technical assistance as critical for a successful effort.

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