

## **DHA getting better all the time Park neighborhood programs set kids on course for success**

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DOVER -- Since their construction, the Whittier park and Mineral Park neighborhoods have shattered the traditional negative images of crime and unkempt neighborhoods associated with public housing.

Under the direction of Jack Buckley, the Dover Housing Authority boasts 184 clean, well-maintained family units in the two areas of Whittier Street.

The Dover Housing Authority also maintains 274 senior units at Central Towers and Waldron Towers. In fact, the Housing Authority is taking steps to make the two senior high-rises less institution-like and more inviting.

Buckley's staff also offers a host of successful programs that prevent children from engaging in at-risk behavior such as drinking alcohol and using drugs.

The Dover Housing Authority scoffs at the reputation of public housing, evident in Dover since the Whittier and Mineral neighborhoods are locally called "the projects."

"People tend to focus on the negative aspects of Dover (public) housing. We really are a success story," Buckley said.

The Housing Authority offers after-school programs and referrals for day-care services, the Department of Employment Security and other social service agencies.

Drug prevention programs get children involved as early as age 5 and a "safe haven" is available after school Monday through Saturday until 8 p.m.

The Dover Police Department substation is only a short walk away if needed.

In many ways, residents feel they get more services out of the Housing Authority than they would by relying on city or state agencies. Rent at the units, which includes all available programs is 30 percent of the tenant's income up to certain limits. For example, a family of four earning up to \$39,600 is eligible, Buckley said.

One of the most successful youth assistance programs is the Housing Authority's Homework Lab, which is open Monday through Friday from 2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. The lab, implemented 3 ½ years ago, is nationally recognized and serves as a role model for other housing authorities. In fact, Rochester is evaluating the program.

The lab boasts several successes, including students on the honor roll and recent graduates from the University of New Hampshire.

In the fight to keep children off drugs, tracking children's success in school is key, said Melissa Silvey, coordinator of drug prevention and family services.

"You cannot offer drug prevention programs without attributing it to educational attainment," Silvey said. Students get points for attendance and staff works closely with the School Department to track progress.

In fact, school relationships have grown to a point where a middle school teacher's aide drives down to the neighborhood to distribute assignments and work with the students.

Tied into the homework lab is a youth athletic league under the direction of Dover Community Police Officer Stephen Meserve. The league plays different sports on an eight-week rotation, but students must attend the Homework Lab to play. Otherwise, they sit on the sidelines.

"Meserve is unbelievable with the kids," said Silvey, who added the officer has become a role model among the youths. In fact, through the police presence, crime is down considerably, from double digits to a few arrests per month.

"We have a children's crime watch where we tell kids what is a crime - what's right and what's wrong," Meserve said. People look out for each other and are quick to point out any crime.

Often, residents won't hesitate to come knocking on the police substation door when something seems afloat. He pointed out one incident in which

someone decided to take a resident's bicycle out for a joyride. About 20 youths chased the perpetrator down and he returned the bike.

But the services don't end there. The Seymour Osmond Community Center, which houses the Homework Lab, also features a basketball court, kitchen and classrooms.

Residents can take classes through YouthBuild, an organization that teaches people valuable vocational skills for well-paying jobs in construction. All services are funded through a combination of rent and grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.