

For some, crowded housing is not a choice



This Philadelphia Housing Authority project is similar to the public housing unit that was the site of a tragic fatal fire last week that left 12 people dead. Families living in cramped conditions in the city have few options, with thousands waiting for subsidized housing. —THE NEW YORK TIMES PHOTO/MARK MAKELA

Scarcity of affordable homes feeds scramble for subsidized sites

**Sophie Kasakove
Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs
Frances Robles
Campbell Robertson**

The main thing people noticed about the century-old brick house at 869 N. 23rd St. was all the children, who would spill out noisily every morning into the streets of Fairmount, a comfortable neighborhood just north of Center City.

But after a fire roared through the upstairs apartment Wednesday morning, the hidden reality of the house was laid bare to the world. Firefighters found that 18 people had been inside the four-bedroom public housing unit, triple the number of people who had moved in a decade earlier. And now 12 of them — mothers, sons and daughters of one big, extended family — were dead.

"Rosalee believed that it wasn't safe," Caleb Jones, a child therapist who worked with two of the children, said of a mother who died in the fire.

With several people crowded into each bedroom, the family had wanted



People gather near the aftermath of a fatal rowhouse fire that killed 12 people in Philadelphia's Fairmount section last week. —THE NEW YORK TIMES PHOTO/CAROLINE GUTMAN

to move to a larger home for years, Jones said. But with 40,000 households already on the waiting list for public housing in Philadelphia, they had little choice.

"I know it's a freak accident, a fire," Jones said. "But them being in that situation was systemic."

Crisis in affordable housing

The situation — a growing family forced to crowd ever more tightly into the apartment it already had — is not unique to Philadelphia. Across the country, a crisis in affordable housing

HOUSING » 4A

Philly principal empowers single moms

Her nonprofit works to educate, house and boost mothers

Chanel Hill
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

A North Philadelphia principal is empowering single mothers throughout the tri-state area.

Crystal Edwards, principal of the William D. Kelley School, is the founder of Empowering Single Moms Inc.

Launched in 2015, the nonprofit's mission is to educate, house and restore single mothers receiving federal assistance through self-sufficiency training, conflict resolution and educational programs.

The organization offers services in education in Philadelphia, Newark, NJ and Wilmington, Delaware.

"I wanted to support single mothers in a way that I wasn't supported as a single mom," Edwards said. "I also wanted to chip away at the stereotypes by society that single mothers are Black women who are on welfare and have multiple children by different men.



Comedian and actress Kym Whitley, from left, founder of Empowering Single Moms Inc. Crystal Edwards, Empowering Single Moms Inc. program participant Sydney, and TV host and singer Kelly Clarkson. Edwards was featured this week on Clarkson's syndicated national talk show as a "Rad Human." —SUBMITTED PHOTO

"When in reality, a lot of single mothers are mothers who are divorced, who are widowed or who were engaged to the love of their lives and something happened," she added. "Single moms are people who are trying to bounce back from heartache."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2020 of the 15 million single-parent families, 80% were headed by single moms. Of all single-parent families in the United States, single moms make up the majority.

Edwards said that her

passion to help single moms came from her own personal experience as a mom.

"My focus is on the mothers who are on public assistance, but who don't want to be there," Edwards said. "I want to be able to relay the things that I went through to help another woman navigate through the same system."

"We do an assessment where we ask 'where are you today and where do you want to get to?'" she added. "Through partnerships, networking, and programming we make sure that these

women are able to reach their goals."

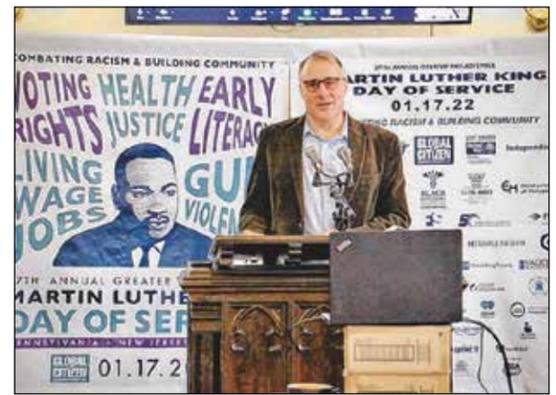
The programming for single moms include career goal analysis, individual empowerment planning, career training, parenting classes, Solace Sunday, and Career Closet.

The organization also offers services in education and matriculation tracking, networking, employment referrals, health and wellness support and community distribution.

"We have career programming and personal programming," said Ayoka Blandford, Empowering Single Moms Inc. executive director. "We have a virtual program called Solace Sunday where every other Sunday we have featured guests who are single mothers discussing a certain topic."

"We've had financial planning, talked about real estate and offered virtual cooking demonstrations," she said. "We've had Q&A sessions where women just talk to each other. We're trying to introduce people to self care. We also have fundraisers."

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Todd Bernstein, founder and director of the Greater Philadelphia Martin Luther King Day of Service at Girard College, announces the slate of activities for this year's event. —PHOTOS: EMMA LEE/WHYY

MLK Day of Service to be mostly virtual

This year's theme is 'Combating Racism and Building Community'

Peter Crimmins
WHYY

The 27th annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service in Philadelphia is coming up on Jan. 17, but things will look different this year.

Because of the surge of COVID-19 infections, many activities will be held online.

At Girard College — normally the main hub of activity — there will be a COVID-19 vaccination clinic run by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and a testing clinic run by the Black Doctor's Consortium.

"A number of previously planned in-person efforts are now moving virtual, and that's really understandable," said Day of Service organizer Todd Bernstein. "Doing it virtually really does open it up to a greater number of people, as opposed to doing it in person."

The theme of 2022's Day of Service is "Combating Racism and Building Community," with a focus on five specific issues: health justice, voting rights, gun violence, early literacy, and living wage jobs.

Girard College Co-Chair and Interim President James Turner acknowledged how all of these issues have intersected and become more urgent during the pandemic.

"As Dr. King said, true peace is not merely the absence of tension. It is the presence of justice to achieve peace, to bring justice into the world," he said. "It takes all of us working together. I know we will all get through these challenging times and continue the important work of living Dr. King's legacy."

King's ideas and legacy will be on full display in the waiting areas of the vaccine clinics, where people linger after receiving injections so they can be monitored for reactions. In those waiting areas will be children's stories told about King, videos of King's speeches, and a voter registration drive.

There will be some in-person activities, including volunteers with Philabundance packing food for people in need, at least 10 sites around town will be registering people to vote, and the Philadelphia Orchestra will perform its annual free concert for MLK, but at the Kimmel Center this year

instead of the Girard College chapel.

The concert, conducted by music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, will feature the 12 year-old violin prodigy Amaryn Olmeda, and a narration of King's "I Have a Dream" speech recited over the music of Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings." It will also feature music by Black composers Florence Price and Valerie Coleman.

"To be able to say that we're putting on a concert live and in-person this year is no small thing," said orchestra CEO Matias Tarnopolsky. "Yannick will be leading a performance with the musicians of the Philadelphia Orchestra that reflects our commitment to what we call IDEAS: inclusion, diversity, equity, and access strategies."

During Wednesday's announcement of this year's MLK Day of Service events, the organization Citizen Global presented its annual Harris Wofford Active Citizenship Award to former Philadelphia City Commissioner Al Schmidt, for his work ensuring the integrity and honesty of the election during the tumultuous 2020 vote count, when he endured personal attacks for doing his job.

Schmidt left that position last week after 10 years, and is now the CEO of the Committee of Seventy, a voting advocacy and elections watchdog group.

"It's a little bit of a change, going from public service to this nonprofit role, but the fight is the same fight: advocating for voters and enfranchisement, combating any barriers to voting," said Schmidt. "And right now, our shared responsibility to defend democracy, which is under attack at the federal, state and local level."

At the announcement, some speakers acknowledged a sense of fatigue, with both the persistence of the pandemic and the pace of the fight for equity and justice.

"We never stopped the fight. Do we get tired? We've been working 50, 60 years for the same things. Things change. We've all watched the change," said Karen Asper Jordan, president of Cecil B. Moore Philadelphia Freedom Fighters. "You've all been a part of the change. Do you get dis-

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