

Over the past twenty years Georgia has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth bringing new jobs to the state. This increase in jobs brought an influx of families seeking the promise of those new jobs. The increase in families brought an increased need for safe and affordable housing. Unfortunately, Georgia was already experiencing a shortage of affordable housing. The increased demand put a major strain on communities to come up with solutions to address the housing needs of its citizens.

Additionally, many of Georgia's communities are also faced with substandard rental and owner occupied housing units. There is also a great need for a coordinated community approach to a growing Latino population and historic housing stock. Additionally, many local organizations lack the capacity to serve the community's housing need. The Georgia Initiative for Community Housing (GICH) was formed in 2003 to assist Georgia's communities in addressing this very important state need of safe, decent, and affordable housing for the citizens of Georgia.

Since its inception, twenty-one (21) communities have participated in this Initiative. Over the years, GICH has aided communities in removal or rehabilitation of substandard housing, neighborhood revitalization, community education on housing issues, tenant education, home buyer education and financial literacy training. GICH communities have added quality affordable housing units for rent and purchase, as well as increased community involvement, funding, and resources.

This innovative Initiative grows out of Georgia's experience with the National League of Cities' Affordable Housing Program. GICH offers communities a three-year program of facilitated collaboration and technical assistance. Since communities within Georgia are so diverse, it was important that each community be able to address the particular needs of its citizens. The centerpiece of GICH is a series of facilitated retreats designed to allow communities to fashion solutions to meet their specific housing needs. At these retreats, teams attend related workshops and receive direct technical assistance tailored to each community. Participation is designed to (1) help communities identify housing needs and develop a plan to meet their housing objectives, (2) provide communities with ready access to technical assistance and housing expertise, and (3) enhance local understanding of housing resources and tools available to grow their community.

Now beginning its fifth year, GICH communities all across Georgia have seen results that are helping to increase the pool of safe and affordable housing. Listed below are just a few examples of some of these results:

Redeveloping low income deteriorating neighborhoods

- One example is North Towne in Cartersville. A neighborhood redevelopment plan was created for the area in accordance with the Georgia Urban Redevelopment Act. In addition, four dilapidated homes were removed, an eighteen unit apartment building was gutted and renovated, seven townhomes were constructed, and a fee simple cluster housing development was started. As a result affordable housing was made available to over 29 families.
- In Fort Valley, the community applied for and received a grant from HUD Historically Black Colleges and Universities program and a state Community HOME Improvement Program (CHIP) grant, enabling the community to purchase and demolish seventeen structures in targeted neighborhoods. The City's code enforcement board also adopted a policy in which the City provides labor for the removal of dilapidated structures if the owner pays the disposal tipping fees. Collaboration between two other non-profits was established to provide new home construction. These collaborations helped to keep cost to a minimum.

- The Sylvester Team concentrated on revitalizing the city's southwest quadrant by identifying viable lots for infill housing and removing dilapidated structures. The City also provided rehabilitation or reconstruction funds for thirty (30) low income homeowners, constructed a thirty unit senior apartment building, and hosted a housing fair with monthly credit counseling for citizens.
- In Thomasville the team partnered with the City of Thomasville, R.M.I., Habitat for Humanity, D.A.S.H., and Thomasville Landmarks to rehab five houses. Twenty-two dilapidated structures were removed providing infill opportunities and establishment of a new local historic district.
- The Valdosta team made great strides with three successful "Southern Hospitality Group Work Camps" that repaired 144 houses. The team also demolished 442 substandard houses, brought 301 up to code, completed an update to a housing survey, and collaborated with Habitat for Humanity on a successful partnership build in Valdosta.

Looking ahead to the future:

As a result of participating in the GICH retreats, many of the communities have begun to think of creative ways to address their affordable housing needs:

- The Camden County Team is using demographic data including wages to determine housing costs. Coupled with data such as inventory of government owned property that might be developed as affordable housing, this data will be utilized to educate government officials, business leaders, and the public on the affordability of current housing and those needing housing in Camden County.
- The Dalton/Whitfield County Team is focusing efforts to help homeless and unstably housed residents, participating in the 2007 and 2008 Homeless Point in Time Count conducted by the state. Additionally, a bi-lingual zoning brochure was developed to meet the need of the county's very large Latino community.
- The Hall County Team's primary focus is to revitalize the Black and Cooley Drive Community through rehabilitation and construction of homes. A county-wide Housing Market Assessment is near completion which will assist the Team in determining the next area of focus.
- Moultrie's focus is to foster the development of affordable workforce housing. By creating relationships with developers and local banks, new in-fill houses have been completed and sold. Additionally, revitalization of the Northwest area of the city has begun.
- The Waynesboro Team has focused on revitalizing its existing housing stock, whether rental or owner occupied. Through CDBG and CHIP funds, 136 units are in the process of being rehabilitated.

Additional GICH Teams are working on housing assessment surveys, increasing available housing units through new construction or rehabilitation, taking credit financial classes in order to provide home buyer education in their community, and developing partnerships with builders and local business leaders to promote affordable housing.

The benefits of GICH far out weight the cost. GICH represents a joint effort of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA), the University of Georgia's Housing and Demographic Research Center (UGA) with in-kind support provided by Georgia EMC. Administratively housed at UGA, GICH is funded entirely by major contributions of Georgia Power Company, the Wachovia Foundation, USDA/Rural Development, and AGL Resources Foundation. Each year, expenses total approximately \$50,000. This is a nominal cost for the major benefits being realized in Georgia's communities.

This collaborative initiative brings together representatives from local, state, and federal government agencies, along with business community leaders, all with the goal of helping Georgia's communities create and launch locally based plans to meet their housing needs. Creative in itself, the GICH application is the first step in the development of the community's plan by identifying its housing needs, housing team members, and its building blocks or other factors that will lead to success for the housing program.

A site visit is performed for each applicant community. An interview is performed to ensure that the right mix of community representatives are part of the team. Once all applications are reviewed and site visits completed the partnerships selects five communities that are ready to fully participate in the three-year program.

The GICH model is easy to replicate by other states. A major benefit of the GICH model is that it is structured in a way that provides the opportunities for community leaders to network and to learn from each other.

- Once the communities are announced in November of each year, the real work of the communities begins in February with their first two-day planning retreat.
- This model allows the teams to work in a focused setting, while learning and interacting with the housing teams from the other communities.
- Six months later the teams attend a second retreat that includes facilitated work sessions for each team aimed at assessing progress to date and developing an action plan. Resources and information sessions based on housing issues identified by the teams in the first two-day retreat is also provided.

The yearly goals of GICH communities vary depending on their stage in the program;

- In year one, the program seeks to help communities solidify the housing team, to fully understand its housing needs, and to develop a housing plan that includes a strategy for action.
- Year two begins the implementation phase with the goal being to keep the communities progressing toward meeting their housing objectives, provide an opportunity to develop additional goals and work plans, and to renew the team's commitment and energy.
- Year three the community housing teams begin to move independently toward meeting their housing goals through developing a plan to sustain future efforts.

One unique aspect of GICH is the commitment of staff resources brought by the partnership. DCA Regional Representatives routinely check on each team's progress between retreats and help to access any specialized assistance required. DCA housing staff is available to provide technical assistance on an ad hoc basis. In addition, GMA legal and research staff answer questions and provide assistance to participating cities as needed.

Through GICH, Georgia's communities are learning how to put together an affordable housing action plan that is initiating positive changes in the lives of their citizens. Mayor Billy Trapnell, City of Metter, sums up the benefits of GICH, "We all feel like we have a good knowledge of our respective community, but GICH has opened our eyes to situations both good and bad that we were not aware of before. The GICH meetings have again and again provided speakers that have already addressed these and other issues. They invented the wheel for us, and it is working wonderfully. I strongly support this program and encourage other cities to seek to be included."