


# INVESTING IN PEOPLE AND PLACE

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## Brookline Housing Authority Strategic Plan

Adopted by the Board of Commissioners, November, 2014



Providing low-income families, seniors, and people of all abilities with safe, decent, accessible, and affordable places to live in a community rich with opportunities.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Brookline Housing Authority (BHA) has a 66-year history of constructing and managing a portfolio of well-maintained buildings, delivering extensive resident services, and accumulating a strong record of regulatory compliance. Doing so has required the Authority's leadership to regularly and methodically identify, confront and surmount challenging circumstances. To maintain this noteworthy track record, the BHA's new strategic plan establishes a fresh set of priorities to address today's pressing challenges and create conditions that will safeguard the future of affordable housing in Brookline.

## STRATEGIC ASSETS

The BHA is well-positioned to meet today's challenges and tomorrow's needs. It has:

**A BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS** committed to the Authority's mission, with deep roots in the Brookline community and highly relevant skills and experience.

**A SEASONED PROFESSIONAL STAFF** that is knowledgeable about the BHA's properties and residents and the intricacies of public housing programs.

**THE COMMITMENT AND GENEROUS SUPPORT** of the Town of Brookline, the state's Department of Housing and Community Development, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and many agencies and organizations in town that value the BHA's contributions to the community's diversity and good neighborhoods, as well as its support for low-income residents.

**A LARGE AND VALUABLE PORTFOLIO** of well-located and permanently affordable residential properties.

## STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

Even with these valuable assets, the BHA faces some formidable challenges:

**CAPITAL REPAIR DEFICITS:** Due to the normal effects of time compounded by insufficient funding for capital repairs over many decades, the BHA's housing inventory needs major rehabilitation. Capital needs in its family developments approach \$100,000 per apartment.

**DECLINING RESIDENT INCOMES AND INCREASING NEEDS:** The real incomes of BHA residents have decreased dramatically over the past decade. Many working-age residents face multiple barriers to improving their economic status. And many of the BHA's senior citizens need increased support to live independently in their own apartments.

**BUDGETARY PRESSURES:** Dependence on severely constrained state and federal budgets and rising operating costs driven by outdated building systems, as well as regulated retirement and health benefits, threaten to displace other budget priorities. CONTINUED ON PAGE 4>>



***I am writing with warm thanks from our church to you and your staff for helping our parishioner and her two daughters find a new affordable place to live in Brookline.*** Pastor of a Brookline church

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Based on the Authority's analysis of its strategic challenges and assets, and guided by a refreshed mission statement the Commissioners adopted the following strategic initiatives. These will be the focus of the BHA's efforts in the coming years.

### **REHABILITATE THE AUTHORITY'S EXISTING FAMILY DEVELOPMENTS**

Preserving our invaluable housing assets will require major renovations and, in some cases, comprehensive rebuilding. To do so will demand a dedicated, long-term commitment by the BHA and its funders, redeployment of staff resources, and fashioning new financing strategies.

### **ESTABLISH A COMPREHENSIVE SELF-SUFFICIENCY PROGRAM FOR BHA RESIDENTS**

The real income of households in the Authority's family developments has declined by an alarming twenty percent over the past decade due to stagnant wages and shrinking government support. Emerging national models provide promising approaches to helping low-income people improve their economic well-being. Building on the collaborative model behind Brookline's well-established Steps to Success program for students, the BHA intends to assemble a partnership to create a comprehensive self-sufficiency initiative for adult BHA residents.

### **EXPAND SERVICES FOR BHA SENIORS**

Real income for residents of the BHA's elderly developments has declined by twelve percent over the past ten years. Our seniors also are living longer. They require increased services and medical care to continue residing independently and with dignity in their BHA communities. Given the BHA's limited resources, the Authority intends to call on local organizations that specialize in delivering services to seniors in their homes to help fill this critical gap.

### **SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETE THE DUMMER STREET PROJECT**

Successful completion of the Authority's construction project under way at 86 Dummer Street will be a major achievement. It will add 32 greatly needed affordable apartments to Brookline's housing stock, improve the BHA's capacity to develop future projects, and diversify the Authority's revenue base.

### **BUTTRESS THE BHA'S CAPACITY FOR SUSTAINED HIGH PERFORMANCE**

As the Authority stretches to address major challenges, it must at the same time make sure that its properties continue to be well-managed, that residents continue to have safe and affordable homes, and that the BHA maintains its solid reputation with funders, partner organizations, and the Town of Brookline. Sustaining first-rate performance will require improved management systems, investment in staff development and technology, as well as creative measures to enhance revenue, reduce costs and improve efficiency.

# STRATEGIC PLAN

## BACKGROUND

The Brookline Housing Authority (BHA) is an independent public agency created pursuant to Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 121B in 1948 to operate in the Town of Brookline. The BHA is governed by a five-person Board of Commissioners. Brookline voters elect four of the commissioners and the governor appoints one. The BHA owns and operates 12 housing developments located throughout town and containing 924 apartments. The Authority also manages the federal Section 8 and the state MRVP rental assistance programs—commonly referred to as housing vouchers—which provide housing for an additional 966 households.



***“I would like to give recognition to the Authority’s project coordinator. She was always on-time. Her scheduling made the job run very smoothly and she handled problems professionally and courteously.”*** Contractor to the BHA

On a day-to-day basis the BHA carries out these core functions:

**PROPERTY MANAGEMENT**, including leasing apartments, maintaining full occupancy, lease enforcement, rent collection, and building maintenance.

**FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT**, including budgeting, maintenance of accounts, and working with outside accountants and auditors.

**ADMINISTRATION OF THE SECTION 8** and MRVP housing voucher programs, including selecting recipients, inspecting units, and making payments to landlords.

**ASSET MANAGEMENT**, including capital repairs and improvements to the buildings and grounds.

**FACILITATING DELIVERY OF SOCIAL SERVICES** to the residents, including Authority-funded services as well as services funded by other agencies and organizations.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

In 2013 the BHA Board and Executive Director launched a planning process. It produced this Strategic Plan, which was completed and formally adopted in November 2014.

### Objectives

- 1 Revise the mission statement to reflect the Authority's updated understanding of its essential purpose.
- 2 Establish a shared understanding among members of the Board and staff of the Authority's key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
- 3 Identify the Authority's highest-priority objectives.
- 4 Establish procedures for regular Board and senior staff collaboration on planning to achieve strategic initiatives, allocating staff and financial resources, and regularly revisiting the Strategic Plan.

### Process

The Authority's strategy consultant, Carl Sussman of Sussman Associates, conducted more than 30 in-depth interviews with the Commissioners, members of the BHA staff, town officials, BHA residents, partner organizations, and funders. • Sussman reviewed documents related to the Authority's operations and structure. • He conducted a best-practices scan of anti-poverty and economic self-sufficiency programs. • The BHA staff assembled a quantitative trend analysis of the Authority's finances, staffing, programming, resident population, operations, and capital needs. • Sussman facilitated a day-long retreat for the Board and senior staff to reach a preliminary consensus on the main elements of the Strategic Plan. • The staff held a two-hour meeting with BHA residents to solicit their suggestions on the mission and goals for the Authority. • The Board and the Executive Director along with Sussman met several more times to refine and finalize the Strategic Plan.

# MISSION STATEMENT

As part of the strategic planning process, the Commissioners revised the Authority's mission statement to reflect its core values and sense of purpose. The revised mission statement anchors the BHA's strategy and will guide its day-to-day activities.

*The Brookline Housing Authority provides low-income families, seniors, and people of all abilities with safe, decent, accessible, and affordable places to live in a community rich with opportunities. The BHA works in collaboration with government and civic organizations to support and encourage the well-being and economic self-sufficiency of BHA residents; to sustain a diverse population in Brookline; and to maintain attractive residential neighborhoods.*



***I moved into 90 Longwood in 1989! That's a long time ago! I'm writing to you and the entire BHA staff just to say Thank You. Thank you for making this affordable...Thank you for maintaining it as well as you do..."*** BHA resident

# STRATEGIC ASSETS

The Authority’s strategic assets are the foundation of the BHA’s future growth and success. The following strategic assets will exert a strong influence on the BHA’s future.

## 1 Ongoing Government Funding

State and federal law recognize the BHA as Brookline’s exclusive provider of public housing. As such, the BHA receives annual funding to support operations and make capital repairs. While the annual funding provides stability, funding levels vary from year to year and often are not adequate to meet the need.

## 2 Land and Buildings

The BHA is the owner of a valuable portfolio of permanently affordable residential real estate. As discussed below, the buildings have significant capital repair needs—a liability that must be addressed. At the same time, the BHA’s land and buildings provide opportunities. The BHA may be able to create new apartments on existing vacant land or construct additions to existing buildings.

## 3 Board of Commissioners

The Authority’s independent planning consultant reported that, during confidential interviews, external key informants commented on the Board’s professionalism, expertise, and personal commitment to the agency’s affordable housing mission. The Board is seen as transparent and deliberative in its decision making and having stable and skilled leadership. The Commissioners possess a wide range of relevant expertise and experience, including knowledge of housing finance and policy, familiarity with and concern for the Authority’s residents, and positive working relationships throughout the community. These qualities reinforce the Authority’s reputation among the agencies and organizations that the BHA relies on for support.

## 4 Stable Strategic Direction

Over the years, the BHA has pursued a consistent mission-driven strategy that emphasizes:

- Professionalism and high standards of performance.
- Responsible stewardship of real estate assets.
- Cooperative, effective partnerships with other organizations in Brookline.
- A “more than housing” commitment to the residents. This is manifested by the high proportion of the operating budget devoted to resident support services, including mental health counseling, support for career development, services for seniors, and transitional programs for formerly homeless families.

## 5 Experienced Staff

The BHA benefits from dedicated staff members who are knowledgeable about the BHA’s buildings and its residents and have gained valuable experience from their years navigating the specialized world of public housing regulations. Staff members also have developed long-term trusting relationships with partner organizations and the Authority’s many external stakeholders.



## **6 Stable Financial Position**

The BHA is fiscally sound, although its reserve funds have declined somewhat lately due to reduced government funding and the impacts of the recent recession, the longest and deepest economic downturn since the Great Depression. Nevertheless the BHA maintains sufficient unrestricted cash reserves to provide:

- The liquidity the Authority needs to meet its ongoing financial obligations.
- A cushion against future fiscal uncertainties, such as the very real threat of stagnating or declining federal and state operating subsidies.
- Investment and seed capital to launch new initiatives and reinvest in the Authority’s organizational capacity.

## **7 Strong Operating Performance**

The BHA has earned a reputation as one of the best managed of Massachusetts’ 242 local housing authorities, evidenced by consistently strong results:

- A public housing vacancy rate below two percent.
- A Section 8 voucher utilization rate above 98 percent.
- Average work order response time of less than three days.
- Timely utilization of 100 percent of capital improvement funds.
- Tight control over construction budgets.
- Well-maintained properties that blend into the community.
- Accurate, conservative financial management resulting in the BHA’s independent auditors consistently issuing clean and unqualified opinions on the Authority’s financial statements.

Based on these metrics, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) regularly ranks the BHA a “High Performer” in its administration of the Public Housing and Section 8 programs.

## **8 The Brookline Community: Sharing Values and Resources with the BHA**

The Brookline community—including town government and civic organizations—is an indispensable partner to the BHA. Brookline residents as a whole are public-spirited, engaged in civic affairs, and concerned about their lower-income neighbors. The town values a diverse population and recognizes that BHA residents are a major component of Brookline’s economic and racial diversity. As a result, town government and many local civic organizations generously support the Authority. For example, the town contributes a significant portion of its federal CDBG and HOME program funds to the Housing Authority.

Brookline is known for high-quality social services and amenities, which the Authority’s residents are able to take advantage of as town residents. A prime example of partnership with the Brookline community is the Steps to Success program. “Steps” is a collaboration between the Public Schools of Brookline, the Housing Authority, the Brookline Community Foundation, and public-spirited citizens. It provides comprehensive support to Brookline public school students from low-income households. Steps’ participants graduate from high school, enroll in college, and graduate from college at rates far higher than state and national averages for young people from low-income families. Steps to Success has proven to be a bulwark against intergenerational poverty.

# STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

The BHA operates with numerous constraints. Its sources of funding are very limited relative to the capital needs of its properties and the desired level of resident services. Regulations governing public housing are complicated and restrictive. Moreover, the buildings reflect their age. As a result, the Authority faces many challenges related to the condition of its buildings and the needs of its residents.

## 1 Uncertain Funding and Budgetary Pressures

The combined federal and state dollars provided to the BHA have decreased in recent years. The continuing effects of the recession, deficit politics, and a decline at the federal level in political support for public housing suggest that the Authority can expect further funding cutbacks, threatening its ability to maintain the quality of its buildings and resident services.

Inadequate funding for capital repair and replacement over many years has resulted in a growing list of unmet capital needs. The costs of comprehensive modernization and rehabilitation approach \$100,000 per apartment for the BHA's family developments.

Like other government agencies, the Authority faces steadily increasing costs to fund retiree health care and pension benefits. This claim on the operating budget will force difficult tradeoffs in the coming years.

## 2 Operating Constraints

Some aspects of existing work rules and practices impose limitations on the Authority's ability to deploy staff flexibly and creatively.

State procurement regulations and other governmental restrictions on publicly-funded developments add significant costs to all the BHA's capital repair and construction projects.

Consistent with its more-than-housing philosophy the BHA operates a wide range of programs to maintain the quality of life for its residents. Although these add to its operating costs the Authority believes these are essential.

Faced with the fiscal pressures mentioned above and the necessity to continue successful operations in a rapidly evolving environment, the Authority's needs to enhance its office systems and capabilities in strategic budgeting, financial analysis, and aggressive cost control.



***"I've had more than a handful of landlords, and can honestly say I have never had anything as good as what I have here with Brookline Housing Authority."*** *BHA resident*

### **3 Declining Resident Incomes and Increasing Resident Needs**

Trends in the incomes and needs of BHA residents present a major challenge to the Authority’s intention to support a decent quality of life and a path to economic self-sufficiency for its residents.

The average BHA family’s “real income,”—its purchasing power—fell 21 percent over the past ten years due to the recession, declining cash benefit programs, stagnating wages for low-skill jobs, and the nation’s growing inequality.

Many residents face multiple barriers to improving their economic status, including intergenerational poverty, insufficient education and employment training, histories of trauma, poor health, and disabilities, and limited access to technology.

The economic situation of the Authority’s senior citizen residents also has been declining, though not as rapidly as that of the BHA’s family residents. Real income for the average resident of BHA elderly housing is down 12 percent over the past ten years.

Seniors are living longer. This positive trend places new demands on the Authority to improve handicapped access and provide services and supports for residents to enable them to age in their own BHA apartments.

### **4 Capital Repair Needs**

Chronic underfunding from the state and federal governments for capital repairs has created a serious backlog of unmet capital needs. The BHA’s buildings are not energy efficient and their mechanical systems are expensive to operate and costly to repair. To maintain the value and serviceability of its housing inventory, the Authority needs to undertake major rehabilitation, particularly in its housing developments for families.

If the BHA is to provide healthy homes for our residents and maintain properties that blend well into the Brookline community, many of the properties will need:

- Strengthened foundations.
- Repairs to masonry facades.
- Energy-efficient windows and insulation.
- New heating and cooling systems.
- Updated plumbing and wiring.
- Modernized life safety and security systems.
- New landscaping, fencing, and outdoor play areas.
- Rebuilt indoor common areas.
- Infrastructure to deliver low-cost phone, television, and internet services.
- Enlarged and reconfigured apartment layouts to meet contemporary standards.

The BHA’s goal is to achieve these improvements while maintaining the same number of apartments and, if possible, increasing the total.

# STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

## ONGOING INITIATIVES

### 1 Sustain Current Strong Performance

As the Authority stretches to address the challenges described above, it must at the same time make sure that the properties continue to be well managed, that residents continue to have safe and affordable homes, and that the BHA maintains its solid reputation with funders, partner organizations, and the Town of Brookline. The Brookline Housing Authority is committed to maintaining the high standards described in the Strategic Assets section of this plan. Achieving this goal will not be easy. Maintaining its historic level of performance while addressing the emerging challenges described above will require assertive focus from senior staff as well as investment in staff training and technology.

### 2 Successfully Complete the Dummer Street Project

The Authority is well under way on an important initiative launched four years ago: development of 86 Dummer Street, a new 32-unit affordable rental housing project on BHA-owned land adjacent to the existing Trustman Apartments. Construction completion is scheduled for mid-to-late 2015. Success will entail:

- Completion of a high-quality, durable building and courtyard on time and on budget.
- A fair and transparent process for resident selection and an efficient lease-up.
- Integration of the new residents into existing programs like Steps to Success and the BHA's employment skills program, Next Steps.
- BHA staff's acquisition of skills and experience to plan and manage future projects funded with private sector financing tools such as the Low Income Housing Tax Credit.
- Engaging and cooperatively working with a private property management company.

## NEW & EXPANDED INITIATIVES

### 1 Rehabilitate the Existing Family Developments

As described above, the BHA's buildings have massive unmet capital repair and modernization needs, a situation that leads to very high operating costs. Building systems that are outdated and overdue for replacement result in maintenance staff continually patching and repairing plumbing fixtures, windows, doors, masonry, sidewalks, and more, to ensure adequate living conditions. Addressing the capital needs will require augmented staff skills and use of non-public housing funding sources, such as tax credits and tax-exempt bonds. The Authority has taken steps to address the challenge by hiring an executive director with broad finance and redevelopment experience and a senior staff person with similar skills. Successfully rehabilitating the buildings will require a long-term commitment by the BHA, its partners, and funders. The first steps will be to:

- Secure funds to assess capital needs and prepare schematic redevelopment plans.
- Prepare pro forma financing scenarios for how the BHA might raise capital to redevelop its properties.

This research and planning will be critical to the Authority’s ability to match capital improvement projects with funding opportunities. Although they are scarce in the current environment, from time to time such opportunities emerge, as they did with federal economic stimulus funds made available to housing authorities in 2009-2011. By preparing schematic development plans in advance, the BHA will be prepared should new sources become available.

Two measures that would greatly enhance the feasibility of redeveloping BHA properties would be to:

- Find acceptable alternatives to the inordinately costly state regulatory system for procuring construction contractors.
- Achieve HUD approval to convert Section 8 vouchers into project-based subsidies to support debt service financing needed to rehabilitate BHA’s state public housing properties.

## **2 Establish a Comprehensive Adult Self-Sufficiency Program**

As noted, the real income of households in the Authority’s family buildings has declined by more than 20 percent over the past decade. The BHA intends to expand its efforts to support the residents of our family developments. Recent experience nationwide points toward promising approaches to assisting low-income people who are struggling to gain economic independence.

- Comprehensive programming that coordinates and delivers the services of multiple agencies — so-called collective impact strategies.
- Individual case management, including the Urban Institute’s HOST model being piloted in public housing elsewhere in the country.
- Financial stabilization services, including financial literacy training, workforce development, and public benefits eligibility screening. In several communities the United Way sponsors Financial Stability Centers to house these services. The BHA’s own Next Steps program already delivers similar services to BHA residents.
- Matched savings programs that provide an economic incentive to build assets.
- Expanded “ceiling rents,” which provide an incentive for public housing residents to increase their earnings.

The BHA plans to initiate a series of meetings with other agencies in town whose missions include supporting low-income people, to create a comprehensive town-wide self-sufficiency initiative based on the approaches noted above. Several of the BHA’s main partners have expressed strong initial interest in this approach. Assuming there is sufficient commitment among the agencies, the BHA will work with them to develop a plan and secure the resources to implement it. This initiative will be aided by the BHA’s recent receipt of a three-year grant from HUD to hire a resident services coordinator. That new hire will serve as a link between BHA residents and service providers participating in a town-wide initiative. BHA’s Next Steps career development program for residents will be among the building blocks for this comprehensive self-sufficiency initiative.

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The Steps to Success program described in this plan’s Strategic Assets section is a thriving model of comprehensive services and inter-agency collaboration in Brookline. Steps to Success will continue to provide Brookline students from low-income families with the tools to improve their lives. It is time to build on the success of “Steps” as the Authority turns to the challenge of self-sufficiency for adult residents of BHA properties.

### **3 Expand Services for Seniors**

Real income for residents of the BHA’s elderly developments has declined 12 percent over the past ten years. Our seniors also are living longer. Unfortunately many lack the support of friends and family and are isolated. They require increased services and support to continue living in their BHA apartments with dignity. Although the BHA provides service coordination to residents of all its elderly developments, existing services do not fully address residents’ needs. The BHA is committed to expanding and improving services to seniors living in BHA housing. Several Brookline-oriented organizations specialize in delivering comprehensive services to seniors in their homes. Given the BHA’s limited resources and the expertise of these other organizations, the Authority plans to explore partnerships with them to extend services to seniors at the Authority’s properties.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES**

### **1 Strengthen and Realign Human Resources**

A Strategic Plan helps to ensure that the agency’s finite resources are dedicated to activities that address long-term priorities. The BHA’s most important and most scarce resource is the staff’s time and expertise. It is essential that the BHA hire and develop skilled staff members, closely match their job duties with the Authority’s priorities, and, through a new performance management system, measure staff members’ contributions toward the BHA’s goals.

To cope with budgetary pressures, rapidly evolving challenges, and technological change, the BHA will identify and implement measures to strengthen the staff’s skills and flexibility, including ongoing professional development, cross-departmental training, and succession planning. In addition, in order to cultivate leadership throughout the agency, the Executive Director will continue to delegate increasing levels of responsibility and accountability to the senior staff and others BHA employees.

### **2 Improve Financial Position**

Given the combined pressures of shrinking funding, rising operating costs, and the growing needs to increase capital investments and augment resident services, the BHA will seek ways to control routine costs, institute operating efficiencies, and tap new revenues.

#### **Cost Reductions and Efficiencies:**

Among the options the Authority will consider:

- Outsourcing certain functions where economies of scale and specialization can reduce costs without sacrificing quality. Certain tasks, however, such as property management and maintenance benefit from the familiarity BHA’s staff has with the Authority’s properties and residents and should not be outsourced.

Collaborating strategically with other agencies. The BHA has a strong track record working with partners, especially where those partners possess competencies and/or financial resources that are not available within the Authority.

Automation. Online processing of rent payments and housing applications are among measures that have the potential to increase efficiency.

Working with town agencies to maintain a balance between the services and value that the BHA provides to the town on the one hand and the various fees that the BHA pays to the town on the other.

## New and Increased Sources of Revenue

To sustain its current programs, establish new ones, and redevelop its buildings the BHA needs to diversify and increase revenues. Promising approaches include:

Utilizing the Authority's real estate assets to generate income. The BHA might lease rooftop space to wireless companies, for example, or develop its vacant land, as the Authority did on Dummer Street, to create more affordable housing and generate developer fees.

The Authority will consider establishing an affiliated 501(c)(3) organization, enhancing its ability to seek donations and foundation grants.

## STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

The Board of Commissioners, the Executive Director, and the senior staff of the Brookline Housing Authority dedicate themselves to achieving the strategic initiatives identified in the Strategic Plan. The Authority will direct its time and money to accomplishing these initiatives and will track and measure its progress.

The BHA's monthly Board meetings are by necessity focused on routine and immediate responsibilities. Strategic management requires a dedicated forum where longer-term strategic issues receive the attention they require. The BHA Board will hold at least two strategic management meetings per year, where the entire agenda can be devoted to monitoring and managing progress toward achieving the strategic initiatives. At these meetings the BHA will devise implementation plans for each of the strategic initiatives. These plans will identify the key tasks; the needed financial, staff, and outside resources; identify partners and establish timeframes for completing each strategic goal.

The strategic management meetings will be the forum for measuring and evaluating progress; adjusting implementation schedules based on evolving limitations and opportunities, and reviewing emerging lessons and best practices related to the strategic initiatives by tapping outside experts and research, conducting site visits and engaging with our partner organizations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Brookline Housing Authority thanks all those who contributed to the strategic planning process and to the preparation of this document. The Strategic Plan is dedicated to all our past, present, and future Commissioners, staff, and partner organizations. Above all, it is dedicated to our residents, for whom and with whom we work.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM

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