

Family Housing Advisory Services offers hope

By Erin Hockinson

Owning a home is part of the great American Dream. Unfortunately, it's not easy to achieve for everyone.

Generational poverty, loss of job or even worse, a sudden death in the family can prevent the dream of homeownership from coming true. That's why Family Housing Advising Services (FHAS) was founded in 1968—to help families and communities overcome struggles to find a place to call home.

For 16 years, Deborah Dancer, FHAS tenant services program director, works diligently with families in need of housing assistance. Among the range of services are homeless and foreclosure prevention, home-buyer education, asset building and tax-payer assistance.

"The birth of the Fair Housing Act is really what brought about FHAS; the core was really home-ownership, and that's where we started," Dancer says.

Dancer says FHAS found other housing issues such as poverty, segregation, and discrimination which founded the extension of its program to include other services such as rental education and relocations.

Credit issues can be a factor, but sometimes it's just the lifestyle of some of Dancer's clients, she says.

"It's called a 'sandwich generation,' where the clients are taking care of their own children as well as their parents," Dancer says. "The client becomes the sounding board—the one that's leading the charge, helping turn around an entire family. That's a lot for a family or individual to take on."

In addition, FHAS trains and discusses mobility counseling and the effects of helping people move out of concentrations of poverty. Using the scattered-site model, FHAS gives people options to move anywhere in the city, instead of being forced into certain areas, which can cause segregation and social division.

"Everyone who comes through—every family, every household—is individual and as unique as the person(s) themselves," Dancer says. "We see people have different histories, different experiences and some people have greater disparities and barriers than others."

Children and their education, future impending retirement, possible extended family needs and cultural considerations are among the reasons why a family would need education before buying a home.

Dancer says she believes a sense of belonging and pride in a neighborhood is what "makes life bigger" for people. She explains when purchasing a home, you're investing into where you're living and in your community.



Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless

A self-proclaimed vision caster for her clients, Dancer says sometimes she must have uncomfortable conversations with her clients and challenge their thought process.

"We choose to look at the positive, we choose to promote hope and we choose to be honest when it's a difficult conversation to have because it's going to promote positive change."

Working smarter, not harder, is something FHAS believes in, which is why the agency chose to partner with Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACCH).

"There are a lot of beautiful initiatives happening in Omaha and we are so glad because of the breadth of our services, we have a lot of involvement in different areas of those silos," Dancer says.

Dancer says FHAS' partners and its collaborative efforts are what give them the ability to help the community on a broader level.

The partnership between MACCH and FHAS began in 1996 when Dancer and her colleagues thought the root of housing disparities needed to be addressed. Dancer says FHAS believes strongly in servant leadership and sharing a wealth of knowledge.

"Providing some of that knowledge is way for FHAS to give back," Dancer says. "If we truly believe in the dream of a better community, a better Omaha, we would actually buy into that and invest in that."

"He has really courted a model of servant leadership and so I appreciate that," Dancer says.

Dancer says she feels a sense of appreciation when working with MACCH's partners and those who have helped FHAS along the way.

"It gives me hope. It reminds me why I do what I do," Dancer says. "One person can make a difference, and I get to live that out."

