"Until I became executive director of Housing Conservation Coordinators in 1998, I had always been an organizer, never an administrator. I needed help to learn how to do this job. It's not like you can take a course—nonprofit housing agency executive director 101—and follow steps A, B, and C to become an effective leader. This is a specialized field. You need to talk to others in a similar position in this field, learn from their experience and wisdom. So I reached out to other directors within ANHD, and they were incredible. The people there were really willing to share their ideas and expertise. They made themselves completely available to me. They were exactly what I needed. ANHD was key to helping me get my own organization into shape. We were facing some serious challenges, and ANHD helped us to be able to meet those challenges." Sarah Desmond, Executive Director, Housing Conservation Coordinators.
Since 1972, Housing Conservation Coordinators has been working with residents on the west side of Manhattan to protect and defend their right to safe, secure, affordable housing. The area HCC works in, from 34th Street north to 59th Street and from Eighth Avenue west to the Hudson River, was long known as Hell’s Kitchen. Originally home to immigrants of many nationalities, including Germans, Italians, and Irish who worked the docks and built the city’s subway system, this neighborhood later drew African-American and Latino working families. More recently, theater professionals moved into the area because of its proximity to the theater district.

diverse ethnic and racial groups have formed a vibrant community with deep roots and strong ties.

It is that community that HCC has long been working to preserve. With a small staff of thirteen, nine full-time and four part-time, the agency provides a wide array of housing services: preventing evictions; helping low-income tenants access funds to pay rental arrears; helping tenants purchase their buildings; working with tenant associations; representing tenants in court proceedings where building owners have been negligent; assisting seniors in obtaining housing-related benefits; helping tenants file complaints with government agencies in cases of harassment, service reduction, and rent overcharges; and helping tenants save their homes, even in cases where they are threatened by fire damage or structural problems.

HCC also runs several ongoing programs for local residents and nonprofit organizations. Its Weatherization Assistance Program uses state and federal funding to make buildings more energy efficient. Its 7A Program, named after a New York State statute that allows courts to appoint an administrator for badly deteriorated buildings, uses rent

Walter Blenman
Executive Director, South Bronx Churches Morrisania Cluster HDFC, Inc.

THE RIGHT INFORMATION

Individual organizations like ours have been working for years in the South Bronx to create and improve affordable housing and to build community. And we’ve had many great successes. But the battles we’re waging can’t be won by individual organizations or even individual communities. We need to work together with other organizations and communities and we need to help shape citywide policies that support our goals. That’s what ANHD enables us to do. With ANHD, we have the right information and the right networking structure to have an impact on a much larger scale. A good example is ANHD’s Campaign for Affordable Housing. Last year, we worked with other ANHD members to sponsor several high-profile events that promoted the affordable housing campaign in the Bronx, notably a meeting with community residents and new City Council members and a neighborhood tour with mayoral candidate Alan Hevesi. Those events not only helped make affordable housing a key issue in the mayoral campaign, they galvanized our residents and they galvanized the politicians. Working together through ANHD, we got the right information to the politicians. And they got the message.

A substantial portion of the affordable housing stock in Hell’s Kitchen is tenements built in the late 19th century to house industrial and dock workers. Some of the buildings still have bathtubs in the kitchen and common toilets in the hall.

As its name implies, Hell’s Kitchen has had a rough-and-tumble past. At various times throughout its history, the area was the home turf of some of the city’s toughest, most violent gangs. But essentially Hell’s Kitchen is a family neighborhood, where generations of close-knit relatives live within blocks of one another, and where extended families from
money and city loans to correct structural defects, replace
deteriorated systems, address emergencies, and revitalize
buildings. And its Technical Training Program provides com-
prehensive, hands-on classes on home maintenance and
repair, including care of boilers and burners.

HCC joined the Association for Neighborhood and
Housing Development early on, when ANHD was first devel-
oping and advocating for programs that would help transfer
buildings from city to tenant ownership. Over the years, HCC
has helped about 1,500 neighborhood families become
homeowners. With help from HCC, Hell’s Kitchen became the
first area in New York City to transfer all its city-owned prop-
erty into programs through which tenants now own or operate
their buildings.

Although HCC staff members have been trained in fields
as different as law and building maintenance, they all seem
to think of themselves as community organizers. Desmond,
who began her career as an organizer, is active in ANHD’s
Neighborhood Organizing and Advocacy Initiative, a trade
association for members engaged in community organizing.
Each year, HCC staff work with about 1,200 tenants, and
over the years they have organized 85 percent of the build-
ings in the neighborhood. The work must agree with them,
because HCC staff members tend to remain with the organi-
ization, creating one of the most experienced staffs of any in
the nonprofit housing area.

Lately, all that experience is being tested in new ways,
as the neighborhood faces a new threat. “Gentrification,”
says Desmond. “It sounds like a nice word, but in New York
City it is often a synonym for loss of affordable housing and
massive displacement of working families. It’s become a real
problem in our neighborhood. You knew it was becoming a
problem the minute you started hearing developers and real
estate agents refer to the neighborhood as Clinton. New
name, new neighborhood. As if you could erase in a catchy
title all of the community ties that have taken years, some-
times generations, to forge. But if some powerful interests
have their way, that is exactly what they will do.”

HCC mobilized quickly to ensure the basic stability of
the neighborhood even as luxury high-rise buildings sprung
up all around them. The agency formed coalitions with elect-
ed officials, Community Board members, other community-
based agencies, and neighborhood leaders to fight unfavor-
able changes to zoning laws; legal challenges to the Special
Clinton District rules, which state that neighborhood build-
ings at mid-block cannot rise higher than seven stories; ware-
housing of apartments; and general over-development of the
neighborhood.

These actions have produced some significant achieve-
ments. In the past five years, HCC has got all neighborhood
tenants in the Urban Renewal Area, between 51st and 53rd
Streets, into low-income housing renovation programs. And
following a decades-long struggle between owners and ten-
ants of three large buildings on West 42nd Street, an HCC-
led coalition has negotiated an agreement that will create
100 units of permanent affordable housing in a completely
rehabilitated development.

“We recognize the need for change,” says Desmond.
“But we also know it’s important to preserve some things,
like neighborhood stability and a sense of community.
Wealthy interests whose main goal is to maximize profits
have, by their nature, a lot of power and influence. The rest
of us need a little help to protect our interests, and HCC is
here to provide that help. But in order to provide it, some-
times we need a little help ourselves.

“We have been affected by all the changes in Hell’s
Kitchen, just like other residents. We recently moved into new
offices in the neighborhood, and we had no furniture fit to
move with us. ANHD connected us with Deutsche Bank, and
they gave us chairs, tables, and file cabinets.

“We’ve taken advantage of many ANHD programs and
used a lot of the informational materials they produce. Their
Compensation and Benefits Survey helped us set our staff
salaries at a competitive level.

“ANHD connects us—to beneficial government pro-
grams, to financial institutions, to other agencies that share
our goals. It enables us all to learn from one another. It gives
us the support we need. Then we can go out and serve our
communities much more effectively.”
On the Home Front

Leading the Campaign for Affordable Housing and Sustainable Neighborhoods in New York City

Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development