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*Testimony submitted to the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity,  
House Financial Services Committee, United States House of Representatives  
**Academic Perspectives on the Future of Public Housing**  
Hearing Date: July 29, 2009*

Good morning Madam Chair, Ranking Member Capito, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. My name is James (Jim) Fraser, and I am currently Associate Professor of Human and Organizational Development in the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.

I have been involved as an evaluator in a variety of HOPE VI and mixed income housing initiatives across the Southeastern United States, including Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. In addition to my 15 years of experience directly examining these issues, my perspective has been informed by being part of an active community of scholars who share scientific insights through publications, conference presentations, and personal communication. Today, I draw on all of these resources to testify about some lessons learned from HOPE VI, and discuss how these may inform the future of public housing in general, as well as the Choice Neighborhoods legislation in particular.

### **What have we learned from HOPE VI?**

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the HOPE VI program is that it addressed both place-based goals around neighborhood revitalization and people-based goals around economic self-sufficiency, wealth accumulation, and general wellbeing. Among the most important lessons to be learned from HOPE VI is that any policy utilizing such a dual-focus requires as much planning, professionalism, and follow through to create the enabling conditions for people to move up and out of poverty as it does to change the landscape by building housing and providing increased police patrol.

HOPE VI has been very successful in most cases in providing decent, affordable housing that is attractive and suits the needs of many low-income families. My own research in Nashville finds

that virtually every family living in the four HOPE VI developments in that city that they have benefited simply from having access to high quality, affordable housing. Likewise, studies of HOPE VI sites across the country find significant improvements in residents' perceptions of safety as well as objective downward trends in crime. For example, my work in Durham, North Carolina, which examined neighborhood crime trends for the entire city over a five-year period before and after a HOPE VI redevelopment, finds that the 93 square block redevelopment area experienced markedly decreased violent crime rates even while other low-income areas of the City showed an increase in crime.

Thus, by improving housing quality and some neighborhood characteristics HOPE VI has assisted those low-income families who are able to qualify to move back into the redeveloped area. However, people are not benefitting equally for two reasons.

First, while policymakers, academics, and practitioners may agree that it is optimal when mixed-income housing initiatives both revitalize neighborhoods revitalization and ameliorate poverty, it cannot be assumed that all parties involved in these efforts place equal value on these goals. Even when stakeholders claim to support both people- and place-based outcomes, either can become neglected when one of these goals outpaces the other.

Second, HOPE VI has been geared for a specific type of low-income citizen, namely those who have clear paths in mind to achieve their goals, access to decent paying jobs, relatively few barriers in their way, and they view HOPE VI as providing quality, income-stabilized housing as a stepping stone on their journey.

Evidence suggests that the large majority of people in poverty do not fall into this category. Many low-income families live in isolated poverty, with multiple barriers to work, and a lack of access to living wage jobs. Indeed, HOPE VI has been designed to create mixed-income communities based on the belief that somehow low-income families would benefit from being around more middle-income populations. We now know that there is little, if any, evidence to show that living in a mixed-income community, HOPE VI or otherwise, has actually empowered low-income residents to move into economic self-sufficiency, accumulate wealth, or even find living wage jobs. This is where HOPE VI has not been widely effective except for a small handful of sites that have created innovative webs of services to assist the truly disadvantaged.

These findings have prompted some people to suggest that we are expecting too much out of a program like HOPE VI and mixed income housing. Indeed, neighborhood revitalization and poverty amelioration are both enormous, complex undertakings. Other scholars suggest that HOPE VI has accomplished a great deal, but its admitted shortcomings are due to imperfect practice. My review of the literature and my own evaluation work in multiple cities leads me to believe that the main drawback in a program like HOPE VI is that the very residents that we are trying to empower to achieve greater economic self-sufficiency and increased quality of life have not been provided the authority to actually make the decisions about how HOPE VI is implemented and what types of communities are to be built.

Many of us who have evaluated HOPE VI have found that while residents are involved in the HOPE VI process their participation tends to be somewhat superficial. Residents are invited to

form councils that might participate in design charrettes, pick paint colors, or share their feelings about the relocation process. However, these resident councils are, at best, advisory, and, at worst, viewed by others as obstacles to navigate. The lack of authentic resident input and control leads to conditions where some public housing authorities are very successful in managing physical assets but where the ultimate goals of HOPE VI and programs like it rendered clouded, unobtainable, and ultimately lost.<sup>1</sup>

HOPE VI families have quality housing, but broader achievement around people- and place-based goals of neighborhood (economic) revitalization and increased socio-economic status for families has largely not been realized. If residents, through lead community-based organizations, had more control over their homes and neighborhoods, as well as the authority to lead the design of HOPE VI-type, “neighborhood” initiatives, it is likely that these goal sets would be addressed in a manner that mirrored the actual needs of the most important stakeholders involved, low-income residents.

It is not my intent to say that public housing authorities are not capable of meeting the goals of HOPE VI. Rather, I suggest that we are asking too much of them. Let them build on their strengths, which are frequently related to developing and managing housing and other physical assets, and let us instead turn to residents and community-based organizations to lead the public, private, and non-profit sectors towards the intertwined goals of neighborhood transformation and upward economic momentum for low-income residents.

**How can the lessons we have learned from HOPE VI inform the Choice Neighborhoods legislation and implementation? I have a list of several recommendations.**

**First**, in the application process, a community-based organization might be the lead applicant in collaboration with a variety of partners, or a community-based organization might submit a joint application with a public housing agency, again as the head of a collaborative network of community partners. The capacity of the lead organization to effectively implement the project and manage the grant is important, but the capacity of the members of the network to work together around a common project is even more important. Applying community-based organizations should provide evidence of significant resident involvement.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the challenges for HOPE VI in moving from the physical redevelopment of these sites towards the prosperity of people is a disconnect between the careers for which many low-income people train and the economic realities of today. Many of the people I have talked to have made use of training opportunities offered—some of them through HOPE VI programs—to become home care technicians, medical assistants, and other moderately skilled and moderately paying jobs. These people tell me that they make \$20-\$25,000 per year, a decent income compared with the incomes they had prior to HOPE VI. Unfortunately, such incomes are generally not sufficient to purchase a house in a large metropolitan city such as Nashville, even before credit markets tightened. These are people who are doing everything that HOPE VI asks of them, but many of them are unable to achieve a living wage, which leaves them unable to achieve the ultimate goal of homeownership.

**Second**, the sites that are chosen as beneficiaries of this program should have effective partnerships already working to address neighborhood issues. My experience in community development has been that when a grant applicant claims they will convene a coalition of organizations and residents to advise the project, it is rare that such a coalition works effectively. Many important decisions will already have been made in applying for the grant, and the coalition serves merely to try to validate a predetermined program.

**Third**, after sites are chosen, program governance and management should include all actors in the network with the community-based organization in the lead. It is too easy for a lead organization to get various letters of support from community organizations without meaningful shared activities. The grant application should detail how, specifically, the community partners will work together to achieve the desired outcomes.

**Fourth**, there has to be effective monitoring and evaluation over the entire span of the initiative. Several of the HOPE VI projects with which I am familiar completed a simple, frequently low quality evaluation once the grant came to an end. If we want to know how the community has changed, we must collect data about community conditions before, during, and after any intervention. If we want to ensure that the process is effective and just, we must have a means of gathering and using data during the implementation of the project. University researchers can play a key role in this process, but local residents and community organizations must be equal stakeholders to ensure that the data collected is useful and pertinent.

**Fifth**, as need assessments and community conditions change, there has to be flexibility in the use of funds so that ongoing projects, which had been proposed under the initial grant application, can be modified. Lead agencies or community coalitions should not have the ability to modify the activities at will, but there should be a mechanism allowing modification while maintaining accountability.

**Sixth**, there needs to be a focus on building sustainable community capacity. Sustainability in the context of many grants generally means that the applicant foresees being able to find money to maintain what they have built or to continue any program they have started once the grant funding has finished. While these are important, I suggest refocusing the definition of sustainability not so much on the financial side of the equation but on the partnerships and dialogue that undergird any individual activity. If the purpose of Choice Neighborhoods is to create the enabling conditions for individuals and neighborhoods to achieve prosperity and wellbeing, then the process promoting such outcomes must continue after the grant comes to an end. Allowing funds for organizational development, consulting work, and the like for this purpose is essential.

**Seventh**, the housing focus must go beyond the single-family homeownership model. Truly mixed income neighborhoods will have a variety of both incomes and forms of housing tenure. Application criteria can be developed to ensure that there is a mix of both affordable and market rate homeownership and rental opportunities available. Moreover, the existing residents of the neighborhood must be protected from the consequences of increasing land values and speculative investment. It is relatively easy to ensure that low-income homeowners are not priced out of the neighborhood using property tax ceilings and financial and construction assistance to bring

dilapidated structures up to code. It is more difficult to protect low-income renters from landlords who will benefit from subsidized improvements but seek to demand more money for rent. Forms of shared equity housing may be appropriate.

**Eighth**, these efforts need to move beyond mixed income towards mixed-use neighborhoods, ensuring that housing is accompanied by economic opportunity for residents in the form of revitalized and new businesses. Neighborhood residents will be able to identify new business opportunities appropriate for their communities. Ensuring that applications have mechanisms to help people develop small business ideas and obtain startup capital should be a priority. Moreover, including small-scale commercial activities in these neighborhoods not only ensures that low income people without access to personal transportation can meet some of their needs locally but also provides opportunities for all residents to reduce their carbon footprint and improve health when they can walk to the store rather than drive.

In conclusion, we need only look back to comprehensive community building initiatives such as the Dudley Street Initiative in Boston or certain Community Action Agencies of the War on Poverty for examples of highly effective partnerships which effectively promoted housing as well as employment in living wage jobs. There are countless examples across the country of unsung, yet effective initiatives, which achieve both place- and people-based goals. A key characteristic of successful community development is when residents come to the table with an equal footing such that they can effectively play a lead role in determining what happens in their community. This does not mean that residents are the only people who have power. Indeed, another marker of successful initiatives is the range of effective partnerships between a variety of stakeholders—including residents, public housing authorities, community organizations, municipals governments, private sector organizations and the like—that collaborate to achieve program goals. However, perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from HOPE VI is this: the power of community development initiatives will only be realized when residents and community-based organizations come together and develop programmatic efforts that truly serve the needs of diverse low-income populations that live in today's urban neighborhoods.

*Joshua Bazuin*, my graduate research assistant in the Peabody College at Vanderbilt University, and *Meredith Perry*, at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, assisted in the preparation of this testimony.

## **Dr. Fraser's Related Publications and Reports**

**DeFilippis, James and James Fraser. (forthcoming, 2009). What Kind of Mixed-Income Housing and for What Reasons? in *Critical Urban Studies: New Directions*. Jonathan Davies and David Imbroscio (eds.). Albany: SUNY Press.**

This paper questions the premises of mixed income housing neighborhoods and asks why they have become a paradigmatic tool for neighborhood revitalization and community development. We suggest that there is a view among powerful actors in urban studies and urban renewal policy that understands poor people as a pathology leading to neighborhood blight, such that middle- and upper-income residents should move into low income neighborhoods to deconcentrate and disperse the negative effects of large numbers of poor people. Examining the reasons for the increasing dominance of policy making based on mixed income principles, the paper outlines a wide range of theorized benefits and positive outcomes but finds that there is relatively little evidence that the expected outcomes are actually realized. We outline several reasons for the failure of mixed income policies: displaced poor people are often left without the social and institutional support structures upon which they relied in their prior neighborhoods, and mixed income neighborhoods frequently lack social mixing, social networks, and interactions across income levels. Displaced lower income residents move to other neighborhoods which are in turn segregated on the basis of race and class. Continued class-based segregation of neighborhoods leads to segregated public spaces where rich and poor do not interact or even see each other, leading to perceptions by the relatively well off that the United States is a classless society. As this segregation extends to a variety of goods and processes of social reproduction, it threatens the viability of a democratic order based on principles of a society shared by all its inhabitants, rich and poor. Unfortunately, simply ensuring that rich and poor people share the same space does not necessarily lead to productive dialogue. Instead, mechanisms must be put in place to constantly critique renegotiate community and its organizational and institutional manifestations. By themselves, mixed-income strategies are insufficient to achieve this task and, in the long term, to end segregation and promote justice.

**Fraser, James and Michael Nelson. (2008). "Can mixed-income housing ameliorate concentrated poverty?" *Geography Compass*, 2(6), 2127-2144.**

Abstract: Since the 1990s, public policymakers have renewed support for mixed-income housing development in low-income neighborhoods as a means toward neighborhood revitalization and poverty amelioration. Research to date finds that, while mixed-income developments in lower-income neighborhoods have promoted area revitalization, they have accomplished less for people in these areas who live in poverty. This article focuses on mixed-income projects that seek to de-concentrate poverty in impoverished, urban neighborhoods. It finds that, because these efforts are largely market-based approaches, they have paid less direct attention to the needs of lower-income residents. While this shortcoming may be attributed to structural barriers that prevent developers, housing authorities, and service providers from implementing effective practices, resource limitations can be offset by strong community-based participation. Drawing on this conclusion, it is suggested that community empowerment strategies should be implemented in tandem with mixed-income approaches in order to achieve positive outcomes for lower-income residents, but that reliance on place-based community will

unlikely create the necessary conditions to improve the wealth and everyday quality of life issues that poor people face in a predominantly market-based economy.

[http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Fraser\\_Geography%20Compass%202008.pdf](http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Fraser_Geography%20Compass%202008.pdf)

**Fraser, James, and Csilla Weninger. 2008. "Modes of Engagement for Urban Research: Enacting a Politics of Possibility." *Environment and Planning A* 40(6): 1-19.**

Abstract: Cities are increasingly cast as being shaped by globalization and related neoliberal policies. While these diverse literatures have provided needed theoretical advancement to rethink the city in relation to political and economic change, they also run the risk of conceptualizing, studying, and representing cities without sufficient attention to the spatial copresence of multiple actors. The result is that some treatments of the city reproduce a unified story line that conceals human agency, reads as if there is only one trajectory on which all cities are moving, and does not engage in imagining alternative urban futures. In this paper we suggest that there is a continued need to critically examine the spatial narratives mobilized both by researchers as well as by the other actors they encounter. Drawing on the widespread idea that the stories which researchers tell are intimately linked with the conduct of research itself, we advocate a researcher mode of engagement that permits collaborative critique of projects that aim to transform urban space. We report on our experience with two research practices of grounded interviewing, and the public research memo to provide empirical examples of our perspective.

[http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Modes%20of%20engagement%20ifor%20urban%20research\\_enacting%20a%20politics%20of%20possibility.pdf](http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Modes%20of%20engagement%20ifor%20urban%20research_enacting%20a%20politics%20of%20possibility.pdf)

**Fraser, James. 2007. "The Promise of Mixed-Income Housing for Poverty Amelioration." *Center for Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill***

Abstract: Since the 1990s, public policymakers have renewed support for mixed-income housing development in low-income neighborhoods as a means toward neighborhood revitalization and poverty amelioration. Research to date finds that, while mixed-income developments in lower income neighborhoods have promoted area revitalization, they have accomplished less for people in these areas who live in poverty. This policy brief focuses on mixed-income projects that seek to de-concentrate poverty in impoverished, urban neighborhoods. It finds that, since these efforts are largely market-based approaches, they have paid less direct attention to lower-income residents and the community-based organizations that represent them. While these shortcomings may be attributed to structural barriers that prevent developers, housing authorities and service providers from implementing effective practices, competency, and resource limitations can be offset by strong community-based advocates working with public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Drawing on this conclusion, it is suggested that community empowerment strategies be implemented in tandem with mixed-income approaches in order to achieve positive outcomes for lower-income residents.

<http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/JimFraserPolicyBrief.pdf>

**Fraser, James, and Edward Kick. 2007. "The Role of Public, Private, Non-Profit and**

**Community Sectors in Shaping Mixed-Income Housing Outcomes.” *Urban Studies* 44(12): 2357-2377.**

Abstract: Since the 1990s, public policy-makers in the US have renewed support for mixed income housing development as a means towards inner-city neighbourhood revitalisation and poverty amelioration. Yet, research to date finds that, while these mixed-income developments have promoted neighbourhood revitalisation, they have accomplished less for people in these areas who live in poverty. This paper theorises about the conditions that may in principle lead to these alternative outcomes. The approach emphasises the continuity in goal sets and capacities among four sets of urban actors—investors, local government, non-profits and community residents. To examine extant theory and an alternative model, case study evidence is offered from two comparable cities with different mixed-income initiatives and different configurations of goals and capacities among the four stakeholder groups. It is found that place-based outcomes (i.e. neighbourhood revitalisation) from mixed-income efforts hinge on the continuity of goals and effective capacities of investors, government and non-profits, but not community residents. It is also found that, with or without goal consonance and capacity, existing residents are relatively underserved by mixed-income initiatives while other stakeholders realise a variety of benefits.

[http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/JF%20Urban%20Studies%20\(11-2007\).pdf](http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/JF%20Urban%20Studies%20(11-2007).pdf)

**Fraser, James and Edward Kick. 2005. “Understanding Community Building in Urban America: Transforming Neighborhood Identity.” *The Journal of Poverty* 9(1)23-44.**

Abstract: Neighborhood-based community building has been positioned as an effective strategy for combating urban poverty in America. This paper considers three predominant models of community building in America, and focuses particularly on a contemporary derivative of these—community-building initiatives that claim to address the circumstances of urban poverty through people- and place-based neighborhood revitalization. The empirical evidence shows that the impacts of community building on poverty often are left undocumented. Community-building initiatives can increase neighborhood organization, connect neighborhood actors with existing political-economic structures at the city level, enhance neighborhood-level infrastructural development, increase community surveillance of crime and provide new homeownership opportunities. Yet tensions appear to exist around economic, political and land-use issues, in part due to “consensus-based” planning that actually limits residential involvement in a variety of ways. Further, when taken as a whole, community-building initiatives in some respects serve the already advantaged, instead of being a new agenda for political-economic changes that aid the urban poor.

<http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Understanding%20Community%20Building%20In%20Urban%20America.pdf>

**Fraser, James. 2004. “Beyond Gentrification: Mobilizing Communities and Claiming Space.” *Urban Geography* 25(5):437-457.**

During the 20th century, neighborhood change and the displacement of low-income residents from their homes has occurred in a variety of ways from the demolition of entire areas to more recent revitalization efforts emphasizing the building of community and new governance structures. In this paper, I argue two interrelated points. First, whereas economic displacement of low-income people from their homes and neighborhoods is one effect of neighborhood revitalization initiatives, there is a wider set of factors that

constitutes the marginalization, displacement, and exclusion of certain population groups from effectively making claims on neighborhood space. Second, in an era of neoliberalization, whereby civil society is expected to play a larger role in neighborhood governance and the provision of social welfare, the formation and activities of neighborhood-based communities, and their relation to state and market forces, have become increasingly important factors to examine. In this article, I address these areas of inquiry through a case study of a neighborhood revitalization initiative in Chattanooga, Tennessee that has been under way since 1998.

<http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Beyond%20Gentrification.%20Urban%20Geography.pdf>

**Fraser, James, and Jonathan Lepofsky. 2004. "The Uses of Knowledge in Neighborhood Revitalization." *Community Development Journal* 39(1):4-13.**

Abstract: This paper focuses attention on the ways in which knowledge operates to structure and limit what can possibly be done in community-building initiatives. Specifically, we devote attention to the forms of knowledge either categorized as 'local' or 'expert'. This paper draws out a theoretical basis to understand how community-building as a process, and professional community-building practitioners themselves, often create, maintain, and police these epistemological boundaries, and through case studies illustrate how this impacts people's access to putting knowledge into action.

[http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/The\\_%20Uses\\_%20of\\_Knowledge\\_in\\_Neighborhood\\_Revitalization.pdf](http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/The_%20Uses_%20of_Knowledge_in_Neighborhood_Revitalization.pdf)

**Fraser, James, Lepofsky, Jonathan, Kick, Edward, and J. Patrick Williams. 2003. "The Construction of the Local and the Limits of Contemporary Community-Building in the United States." *Urban Affairs Review* 38(3):417-445.**

Abstract: With new relationships between state and civil society, community building has arisen as a preferred mechanism to ameliorate urban poverty. Community building is a much-supported but undercriticized paradigm, especially with respect to questions about the benefits that impoverished neighborhood residents actually acquire from these initiatives. The authors examine community building as a process that is related to larger agendas meant to enact certain productions of urban space and challenge many taken-for-granted notions about the realized benefits of this form of antipoverty work. Moreover, they argue that community-building initiatives occur in an increasingly globalized context, providing opportunities for stakeholders other than residents to promote certain productions of space and place. A case study is presented of an initiative occurring in a southern city in the United States to highlight the theoretical framework presented.

**Lepofsky, Jonathan, and James Fraser. 2003. "Building Community Citizens: Claiming the Right to Place-Making in the City." *Urban Studies* 40(1):127-142.**

Abstract: This paper examines how citizenship operates in urban community-building programmes, particularly in the comprehensive community-building initiative (CCI) model. We argue that the current context shaping cities today gives rise to flexibility in citizenship and that this flexibility emerges as a key component by which resident and non-resident stakeholders

position themselves to make claims to participate in CCIs. We posit that, while the CCI model is committed to being ‘resident-driven’, the operative function of citizenship creates a hindrance rather than an opportunity for local resident involvement. We fortify this thesis with a case study from our experience in CCIs.

[http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Building\\_Community\\_Citizens\\_Claiming\\_the\\_right\\_to\\_Place\\_Maki.pdf](http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Building_Community_Citizens_Claiming_the_right_to_Place_Maki.pdf)

**Fraser, James, Kick, Edward, and Patrick Williams. 2002. "Neighborhood Revitalization and the Practice of Evaluation in the U.S.: Developing a Margin Research Perspective." *City and Community* 1(2):217-236.**

The dominant framework of neighborhood revitalization in the United States that emerged in the 1990s is the comprehensive community-building approach based on a “theory of change” model. This framework posits that to improve neighborhoods and the quality of life of residents, programmatic efforts are needed that are “resident-driven” and holistic in their focus. While these types of initiatives flourish, neighborhood revitalization often results in the displacement of low-income families and marginal return for existing residents. Why this occurs in the context of initiatives purporting to aid existing residents is underexamined in the evaluation literature. We argue that researchers engaged in documentation and evaluation of revitalization initiatives need a broader framework to examine heretofore marginalized issues. We use a “margin research” methodology to demonstrate how this alternative form provides a more expansive representation of revitalization activities and outcomes.

[http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Neighborhood\\_Revitalization\\_and\\_the\\_practice\\_of\\_evaluation\\_i.pdf](http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~james.c.fraser/publications/Neighborhood_Revitalization_and_the_practice_of_evaluation_i.pdf)