



**Evaluation of San Francisco Bay Area LISC's  
Affordable Housing and Community Development  
Training Program**

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## **Evaluation of San Francisco Bay Area LISC's Affordable Housing and Community Development Training Program**

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### **Executive Summary**

For over a decade, Local Initiatives Support Corporation's (LISC) Affordable Housing and Community Development Training Program has been successful in increasing the staff and organizational capacity of nonprofit CDCs in Northern California through the training of 65 participants who have contributed to the development of over 6,500 units of affordable housing. By having graduates of the training program on staff, CDCs have increased their levels of affordable housing production and improved their ability to retain project staff. The on-going need for and success of the training program is best summarized by a graduate, "It gave me the skills to stay in the field, to take on more complicated work, and to last longer without burning out."

- The 2000 training program received high marks from participants, approximately 77% rated the usefulness of the training program as "excellent," with the remaining 33% describing it as "very good."
- More than 45 graduates or approximately 69% are currently employed with a nonprofit housing developer, many are still employed with the nonprofit organization that sponsored them during the training program.
- Over 75% of all graduates have remained in the community development field.
- Twenty-one graduates or approximately 32% have advanced to a more senior level position with a nonprofit development organization.



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### **Introduction**

Through its eleven-year history, Local Initiatives Support Corporation's (LISC) biannual Affordable Housing and Community Development Training Program has provided intensive skills building opportunities to 65 participants representing more than 40 organizations from the greater San Francisco Bay Area and Northern California including Sacramento, Santa Cruz and the Central Valley. LISC launched the program in 1990, in direct response to the unmet need for a comprehensive housing development training program to increase the skill levels of new and existing staff from nonprofit community development corporations (CDCs). Clearly, the skills required to develop affordable housing and undertake community development activities are complex and multifaceted, and the pool of trained professionals is limited. The program's goal was to increase the number of project managers with the skills to develop affordable housing and pursue more sophisticated community development projects. As a consequence, the training program has expanded the industry's overall capacity to manage the development process in distressed neighborhoods, resulting in greater efficiencies in affordable housing production as well as community development.

Nonprofit CDCs have had limited success in building their capacity for staff training and development. In order to meet their staffing needs in this increasingly competitive labor market, CDCs often hire new project staff with little professional experience and they rely on on-the-job training to increase their staff's skills and utility to the organization. However, the multiple demands on senior project staff result in them not being able to spend much time training new and existing staff. Additionally, on-the-job training is often limited to the specifics of the development project at hand. As a consequence, newer staff members are frequently left with a fragmented and incomplete picture of all of the stages of the development process and how to carry them out. This can result in less than optimal project development scenarios.

Compounding these problems related to staff development, few CDCs invest in formal educational opportunities to supplement this type of on-the-job training, and those that do have few resources available to them. In the Bay Area, existing resources consist of one and two day seminars on various topics related to real estate development conducted by a limited number of professional associations and training organizations. While all useful, these seminars have critical shortcomings for nonprofit CDCs. Oftentimes, they are short-term and extremely limited in scope. Moreover, they do not contribute to the creation of a

supportive network of affordable housing development professionals who are resources for one another throughout their careers in development.

Since its inception, LISC's Affordable Housing and Community Development Training Program has sought to broaden the impact and influence CDCs have in the revitalization of distressed neighborhoods. By providing practical, comprehensive and intensive skills building opportunities, the program addresses the on-going need for CDCs to increase their staff and organizational capacity to oversee these development efforts. According to survey results and our experience in the field, the training program has been extremely successful in increasing the supply of affordable housing while strengthening the skills and capacity of nonprofit CDCs to manage more sophisticated community development activities. In addition, the program has laid the foundation for an informal network of affordable housing professionals to sustain the community development field in Northern California. Clearly, LISC's training program has played a critical role in the upsurge of community development efforts in the past decade.

### **Evaluation Process**

Since 1990, approximately 65 individuals from over 40 nonprofit development organizations have graduated from LISC's biannual training program. In addition to evaluations that participants have completed at the end of each workshop and after each one-week training session, LISC has conducted several extensive evaluations of the training program in previous years. In May 2001, LISC asked all graduates of the training program to complete a mail-in survey providing more detailed information about their housing development activities. In addition to the surveys, LISC invited a dozen graduates from practically each training year to participate in phone interviews to discuss their experiences in the program, paying particular attention to how the training impacted their work in the community development field.

### **Overview**

LISC's Affordable Housing and Community Development Training Program seeks to address the ongoing need for CDCs to increase the skills and capacity of their project staff. The training program's primary goals include the following:

- (1) To increase the supply of affordable housing through the program's emphasis on production as part of the learning process.
- (2) To increase the development capacity of community-based nonprofit organizations by providing practical, comprehensive and intensive skills

building in affordable housing development and community development strategies and techniques.

In addition, the training program has sought to develop an informal network of affordable housing professionals, thereby strengthening the overall field of community development in Northern California.

Preliminary evaluation results from the mail-in surveys and phone interviews indicate that the training program continues to be very successful in achieving its stated goals of increasing the supply of affordable housing while strengthening the development capacity of nonprofit CDCs in the region.

### **Goal 1: Increase the supply of affordable housing**

During the training program, each participant was expected to work on an actual housing development project, applying the lessons learned in the workshops by creating a real-life context for his or her own skills-based training. Since graduating from the program, 32 participants reported having completed 123 total housing projects, including 104 rental properties and 19 homeownership properties. These housing development activities led to the new construction and/or rehabilitation of approximately 6,526 units of affordable housing, including 856 homeownership properties. The completed projects constitute roughly \$966 million in total development costs, including \$69 million in HOME funds and \$210 million in other federal funds. Since development costs were not submitted with each survey, these figures may actually understate the total costs of developing the reported projects.

Furthermore, training program graduates have undertaken the development of 205 total housing projects since 1990, even though only 123 projects were actually completed. These projects undertaken include approximately 177 rental properties and 28 homeownership properties, representing more than 10,800 units of affordable housing. So far, these figures represent a completion rate of approximately 64% for housing projects undertaken by graduates of the training program.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These figures for completed and undertaken projects reflect only the results from graduates who have responded to the mail-in survey. Although the response rate was relatively high (49%) for a survey of this nature, the figures may understate the total number of housing development projects completed and undertaken by all graduates of the training program. Due to the collaborative nature of the development process, the figures may also overstate the total number of housing projects actually undertaken and completed by the reporting graduates, as well as the total development costs associated with these projects. While several graduates may have reported development figures for the same housing project, few survey respondents reported working at the same organization during the same time period as another respondent.

## **Goal 2: Increase the development capacity of nonprofit organizations**

A preliminary review of the effectiveness of the training program and the current employment of graduates reveals that a majority of program participants benefited from the skills-based workshops and have remained committed to the community development field.

- According to surveys conducted after each one-week training session in 2000, approximately 77% of participants rated the usefulness of the training program as “excellent,” with the remaining 33% describing it as “very good.”
- LISC conducted pre- and post-test examinations on participants during the training program in 2000, and the results demonstrate that project staff improved their test scores by approximately 31% to 45% from their baseline measures. These results clearly indicate the effectiveness of the training program’s skills-based curriculum.
- LISC’s own internal tracking indicates that more than 75% of all graduates have remained working in the community development field, whether at a nonprofit CDC or government agency or intermediary organization involved in public policy, lending or granting responsibilities.
- According to LISC’s estimates, more than 45 graduates or approximately 69% are currently employed with a nonprofit housing developer. More than 30 graduates or approximately 48% are still employed with the nonprofit organization that sponsored them during the training program.
- Of those remaining within the community development field, 21 graduates or approximately 32% have advanced to a more senior level position with a nonprofit development organization. Four graduates are senior project managers, nine are directors of real estate development and eight are executive directors for a nonprofit organization.

The twelve graduates that LISC interviewed were invariably thankful of the opportunity that the training program represented to their professional development as well as the development of their organization’s capacity to produce affordable housing and undertake community development activities. The program successfully increased not only individual skills but organizational capacity. As one graduate said, “The program gave me more confidence to take on more projects. After the training, there was one more person to do different tasks, to share the work load” at our agency. Another program participant further explained, “We have a small development staff, and everyone is an important key to do the work that we do.”

Many graduates had limited professional experience in community development, and only three graduates interviewed had completed a formal graduate-level program at the time of the training. For most of the graduates, the training program was their most comprehensive introduction to the development process for affordable housing and other community development activities. According to graduate after graduate, participation in the training program allowed them to learn all of the elements involved in being an effective project manager in a structured and coherent fashion. One graduate said, “The training helped me to bridge the gap between the work that I was doing before and my new job as an affordable housing developer. It provided me with the pieces that were especially helpful. I learned really how to be a developer.” Another graduate described the program as invaluable since it gave him “a solid foundation to do the work” that he was doing as an assistant project manager.

Many graduates said that without the program it would have taken them much longer to acquire both the skills and the confidence to develop affordable housing and pursue community development activities. One training program participant said that he would “still be groping in the dark” to understand the development process from site acquisition to property management. According to another graduate, “Without the training, I would have learned by trial and error, and made a lot of mistakes in the process.” The graduates with formal training in housing development were particularly enthusiastic about the practical insights offered by the training program. “The training was really relevant to what I was doing at the time,” said one project manager who had just finished a Master’s program in planning. “I learned about affordable housing policy in school, but the training program provided me with hands-on understanding of the financing skills required to bring everything together.”

Many graduates also explained that their own sponsoring organizations didn’t offer many training opportunities for new project staff and that they were unaware of any other program that is as intensive and comprehensive as the LISC biannual training. According to one graduate who is now the Director of Development for his nonprofit organization, “It provided me with a complete picture of the development process. For example, I encouraged a co-worker of mine to enroll in the training program and he found it really helpful. He was in the middle of a project, and he missed the front-end of the project and he didn’t know what to expect from the tail-end.” Clearly, the comprehensive nature of the training program helped prepare new and existing project staff for the different phases of the nonprofit development process.

In addition to increasing staff and organizational capacity, the training program has helped create an informal network of affordable housing developers in Northern California. According to a recent graduate, “It made me aware of

resources in the broader community. I realized that I had a variety of resources to call for support.” For many graduates, this network has provided invaluable support throughout the years, reinvigorating their commitment to the community development field and consequently increasing staff retention at many nonprofit CDCs. According to one graduate who is now a senior project manager, “Had I not participated in the training, I wouldn’t have lasted this long in the affordable housing field. I had developed a network of peers from the training program that I could call upon for support, and they gave me a helpful perspective. They understood everything that I was going through as a project manager.”

## **Conclusion**

Since 1990, LISC’s Affordable Housing and Community Development Training Program has been successful in increasing the staff and organizational capacity of nonprofit CDCs in Northern California, leading to the training of 65 participants and contributing to the development of more than 6,500 units of affordable housing. The intensive skills-based training has helped CDCs increase their levels of affordable housing production, enhance their ability to develop comprehensive community development strategies, and improve their ability to retain project staff. Clearly, the training program continues to be as relevant today as a decade ago, especially since the need for affordable housing in Northern California has escalated and housing development projects have become more complex. In 2001, the role of CDCs remains a critical one, and the number of skilled project managers that graduated from the training program has strengthened their capacity to oversee the revitalization of distressed communities. A quote from a recent graduate best summarizes the on-going need for and success of the training program: “It gave me the skills to stay in the field, to take on more complicated work, and to last longer without burning out.”



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**APPENDIX 1:  
Mail-In Survey and Accompanying Introductory Letter**



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**APPENDIX 2:  
Results from Mail-In Survey**

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**APPENDIX 3:  
Phone Interviews**

Twelve graduates of LISC's Affordable Housing and Community Development Training Program were interviewed during the June to July 2001 period. The interviews were approximately 20 minutes to half an hour in length, and graduates were asked questions related to their experiences in the training program. In addition, graduates were asked to discuss how the program impacted their work in the community development field.

A concerted effort was made to interview at least two individuals from each graduating class of the training program, dating as far back as 1990. However, LISC staff was unable to contact graduates from the class of '94, and only one graduate from the class of '90 was interviewed during the interview period. The interviewees were mostly graduates who had already completed a mail-in survey reporting their housing development activities. Several interviewees, however, were graduates who had not yet submitted their responses to the survey, and LISC staff collected much of the housing development information from them during these conversations.

The following list of questions represents the informal script that LISC staff used when conducting the interviews with training program graduates.

1. What was your experience with affordable housing development before the training program?
2. If you're still working in the community development field, how did the training program strengthen your own professional skills?
3. If you didn't participate in the training program, how do you think you would have been able to develop these skills? What other training opportunities were available to you?
4. How did your participation in the training program help build your organization's capacity to either develop affordable housing or take on more sophisticated community development projects?
5. One of the goals of the program is to help graduates build an informal network of housing development professionals. Can you give me an example of how this informal network has supported your ongoing work?
6. What would you change about the training program? What would you keep the same?

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**APPENDIX 4:  
Results from Phone Interviews**

The following quotes represent the broad range of responses elicited from training program graduates during the telephone interviews.

**“Good Learning Environment”**

- “The trainers created a space where folks could relax and ask their questions.”
- “When you’re in the office, there are too many pulls on your attention.”
- “Without the training, I would have learned by trial and error, and made a lot of mistakes in the process.”

**“Good Overview”**

- “It gave me a solid foundation to do the work of developing affordable housing.”
- “Without the training, I’m sure that my experience as an affordable housing developer would have been more discouraging and overwhelming.”
- “Before the training program, I was a licensed architect and a appraiser for commercial real estate. The training helped me to bridge the gap between the work that I was doing before and my new job as an affordable housing developer. It provided me with the pieces that were especially helpful. I learned really how to be a developer.”
- “It gave me good, formal, basic, hands-on experience.”
- “It provided me with a complete picture of the development process. For example, I encouraged a co-worker of mine to enroll in the training program and he found it really helpful. He was in the middle of a project, and he missed the front-end of the project and he didn’t know what to expect for the tail-end.”

**“No Comparison”**

- “It was the most comprehensive training available for affordable housing development; it covered the whole development process.”
- “I’ve encouraged other folks to apply for the training program. There are other training programs, but they usually have a narrower focus. None are as comprehensive, giving you the whole big picture.”
- “The training program was really relevant to what I was doing at the time.”

**“Build Organizational Capacity”**

- “We have a small development staff, and everyone is an important key to do the work that we do.”
- “The program gave me more confidence to take on more projects. After the training, there was one more person to do different tasks, to share the work load.”

### **“Improve Retention”**

- “It gave me the skills to stay in the field, to take on more complicated work, and to last longer without burning out.”
- “The training gave me a sense of camaraderie, knowing that I was connected to something bigger, like being part of a housing development movement.”
- “The LISC training reinforced my commitment to affordable housing development, that this work was bigger than myself.”

### **“Networking”**

- “I wouldn’t have lasted this long in the field. I developed a network of peers from the training program that I could call upon, and they gave me helpful perspective. They understood what I was going through.”
- “I called up other graduates to ask them questions about a particular kind of project, and to get candid feedback on a consultant or contractor.”
- “I’m always looking for candidates to sit on selection panels for architects and consultants.”