

# Columbia Housing Authority deemed a 'high performer'

By Jodie Jackson Jr.

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Safety improvements in public housing and stronger financial management were key elements to the "high performer" designation the Columbia Housing Authority received last week from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"We're pretty proud of attaining this designation," said Phil Steinhaus, CEO of the local housing authority since 2006. He said the "high performer" designation required improvements in performance and management issues that led to CHA receiving a "troubled" designation just seven years ago.

A "troubled" designation means a score of less than 60 on HUD's annual Public Housing Assessment System. The score improved to 84 — good for ranking as a "standard performer" — in 2007. The CHA earned 91 out of 100 possible points in the fiscal 2009 report to attain "high performer" status.

The housing authority operates 719 units of public housing throughout four property divisions: The downtown family site has 294 units, the Bear Creek family site has 78 units, Oak Towers has 147 high-rise units, and Paquin Tower has 200 high-rise units designed for people with disabilities.

Comparing the 2009 public housing assessment report to reports from 2005 through 2008, the most dramatic improvements came in the physical condition of public housing properties, management and financial standing. The annual report also assesses resident satisfaction.

Several residents on Park Avenue near downtown Columbia declined to comment yesterday on their satisfaction with the housing authority.

"We have gone through some hard times, and to get this distinction just shows the commitment that our employees and our CEO have put into the organization," said Genie Rogers, a 21-year member of CHA's board of commissioners.

Rogers said Steinhaus and his staff have worked "so many hours more than their jobs require to get the housing authority back to this level."

Steinhaus returned the kudos to his staff, crediting Rick Hess for coming on board and improving the housing operations' financial management. CHA now has the sufficient reserves — at least four months of cash — required to achieve the higher ranking from HUD.

Steinhaus also said Lee Radtke, director of public housing operations, took on low property inspection scores at Paquin Tower, which went from a score in the upper 30s just five years ago to a score of 91 in 2009.

Steinhaus said he has also worked to change the "basic community acceptance" that violence and criminal activity will naturally occur in public housing areas. "If you're involved in that, you're out," he said, citing the housing authority's zero tolerance for drug activity and violence.

Rogers said the CHA commissioners see most public housing as "very temporary, transitional housing" that will "hopefully make a difference in peoples' lives instead of perpetuating poverty."

The Columbia Housing Authority was created in 1956 and is funded primarily by federal funds from HUD.