

The University of Chicago Office of Civic Engagement Response to "Towards a Whiter Woodlawn"

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Advocates' Forum

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The University of Chicago Employer-Assisted Housing Program (EAHP), like so many initiatives of the University's Office of Civic Engagement (OCE), aims to strengthen the University's commitment to build a campus community that is more connected to its neighbors. The OCE team appreciates the opportunity to respond to the article "Towards a Whiter Woodlawn" and clarify, given our mission and programs, the misrepresentation of a program of value for our shared community. While we take issue with several of the arguments the article presents, here we would like to clarify five key points.

The Program Is Designed to be a Bridge to Homeownership for a Wide Array of Participants

Dating back to 2003, the UChicago EAHP was established with input from the community and in accordance with national best practices and all applicable Fair Housing Laws as a way for the University to support its employees to become contributing members of our neighboring communities.

The article argues that the program's eligibility requirements effectively restrict its participants to white, wealthy employees but points to no actual data to support that claim. In fact, our data shows

only 40 percent of EAHP homeowners throughout the program's history have been white. When program participant numbers are compared to the total percentage of African-American University employees, the data supports that African-American employees actually use the program and have used the program at a higher percentage than white employees.

We also know that 46 percent of participants reported an annual household income of less than \$60,000, and the average household income for participants is \$73,587. While those are higher than the median income in the area, the program is designed to serve as a bridge to homeownership, meaning it is a resource for moderate income employees, many of whom had rented previously, who want to take the next step in investing in their community when they may not have been able to otherwise close that gap. Accordingly, the program's required homebuyer counseling, which wasn't mentioned in the article, is often cited as one element of the program that participants have found most valuable.

Employer-assisted housing programs are a strategy many anchor institutions across the country use as a way to enable the economic power of their employees to support the community. The idea is by having employees live nearby in communities that are more economically challenged, universities keep dollars in the community that can help to support the kind of vibrant retail and other amenities that all communities desire.

In Context, the Program's Marketing Materials Celebrate Nine Diverse Neighborhoods

Selectively framing a Woodlawn profile page as the program's "brochure," as the article does repeatedly, is misleading. In fact, the Woodlawn profile is not the program's brochure, and the single piece of collateral material is taken out of its broader context. The far more inclusive and actively-used brochure, which is provided to University new hires and others about the program, is also available and clearly

labeled on the respective websites of the Office of Civic Engagement and the University's Human Resources department. That primary EAHP brochure highlights a mix of nearby attractions including Blanc Gallery, Promontory Point, The DuSable Museum, South Shore Cultural Center, Little Black Pearl Art and Design Center, and more, as well as a diverse array of past participants and information. Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago's Renew Woodlawn organization, a trusted community partner listed on the program's main website, also works closely with EAHP to promote and execute the program. Additionally, a number of other documents, FAQs, and links on the HR page and the UChicago Local page offer a wide variety of relevant information about Woodlawn and the other program neighborhoods. The fact that none of these readily available materials were mentioned in the article is curious to say the least, and that degree of omission in data collection is disappointing.

The Woodlawn profile page the article cites is one of nine community profile pages the UChicago Local website links to along with pages on North and South Kenwood, Douglas, Oakland, Grand Boulevard, Hyde Park, Washington Park, Greater Grand Crossing, and South Shore. The document was created in 2014 and has not been updated to reflect the latest iteration of the program.

Program Focus Areas Were Designed to Change and the Woodlawn Focus Area Predated Rising Property Values

With a reference to the proposed Obama Presidential Center in the first sentence and statistics about the recent rise in Woodlawn property values throughout, the article wrongly accuses the EAHP of establishing and promoting its Woodlawn Focus Area to draw whiter, wealthier employees to Woodlawn specifically. In reality, the Woodlawn Focus Area was designated in 2014, long before the Obama Center was announced in 2016 and the subsequent 2017-2018 property value spike.

The focus area was selected because of Woodlawn's proximity to the University campus and because, at the time, the neighborhood's relative lack of development compared to Hyde Park made it a community with diverse housing options for employees. As the article mentions, for several decades, the University was not involved in any development south of 61st Street in Woodlawn. That changed when the University opened a public charter school on 64th Street in 2006 that prioritizes Woodlawn residents for admission. The University has worked closely with the Woodlawn community over recent years, and community residents and organizations, and through various community-led planning processes, have identified 63rd Street as one of the key corridors where they wanted to see additional development. The Woodlawn Focus Area was therefore selected to help support and complement this community-identified goal by channeling more economic power into the area, not for the nefarious reasons the article implies.

The focus area was also always intended to shift to different neighborhoods over time. With guidance from the Office of Civic Engagement-led Community Development Working Group and other community input, the EAHP team, along with community partners, are exploring which neighborhood to shift the focus area to next.

The Local Housing Market Is not, and Has not Historically Been, a Reflection of the Program

An examination of Woodlawn housing data shows that property values have risen and fallen in line with the city as a whole in recent decades.

In 2014, when the Woodlawn Focus Area was established, Zillow data shows the average home value in the neighborhood had dropped by more than \$100,000 in the wake of the 2008 recession. Those numbers only started to rise again after the Obama Center was proposed in 2016. Since it started in 2003, the EAHP has provided assistance to 324 homebuyers, or an average of about seven

homebuyers per year. Suggesting then that the program is driving or seeking to drive property values up and African American residents out through that small a population and within an ever-changing market is a flawed argument. Again, the program wasn't designed to operate at such a scale that it might impact the housing market but instead as a way for the University to support its employees to live locally and support the community.

The idea that local residents are being displaced by wealthy outsiders because of the EAHP breaks down further when one considers that of those 324 homebuyers, nearly 66 percent were already living and renting on the South Side before they purchased their home through the program. In Woodlawn specifically, several decades of dramatic population loss come into play. At its peak in 1960, real estate and city data shows Woodlawn had 81,000 residents and 30,000 homes. Today, it has 25,000 residents and 13,000 homes, and only 10,600 of those homes are occupied. The fact that the city of Chicago now owns much of the neighborhood's vacant land also dispels the notion that the program is squeezing residents out of a densely populated, University-controlled housing market.

Other Assumptions about Race-related Motivations are Unfounded

The author misconstrues out-of-context quotes from department leaders and misrepresents our brief interaction. Minimal due diligence would have included engaging with program staff or participants or community partners to address and clarify specific questions and issues, in addition to supporting earlier claims about program collateral materials and housing market data with appropriate context and verified research. Without concrete evidence to support these assumptions, the article's analysis and conclusions that EAHP is driven and sustained by racial motivations is woefully incomplete at best.

On the contrary, community residents have time and again reiterated to EAHP staff and participants that they desire more economic diversity in their neighborhoods. Presumptions that the program builds on shameful historic practices like redlining are similarly baseless. EAHP has been a program that has received consistent positive feedback from participants, the University, and members of the external community.

Author Biography

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