

Herald-Star

JMHA moving forward



BIG CHANGES — Over the past 18 months Jefferson Metropolitan Housing Authority has focused on addressing the backlog of work orders and making property upgrades, like scheduling regular pest inspections, cleaning buildings, repairing roofs and balconies, and even replacing elevators when needed.
-- Linda Harris

STEUBENVILLE — For an organization that in recent years had resisted change, Tony Morelli happily admits there's been a lot of it at Jefferson

Metropolitan Planning Authority during the past 18 months.

Morelli, the JMHA chairman, described the mood among staff and residents now as “*unbelievably better*” — a healing he credits to the board’s decision in October 2018 to hire a new executive director, Melody McClurg.

In her previous work life, McClurg had been a licensed nursing home administrator and certified dementia practitioner with experience in law enforcement in the public and private sectors, as well as in health care and community relations. She, notably, had no public housing experience, which, in retrospect, doesn’t seem to have been a problem.

Morelli said since taking over, McClurg had hired new property managers, a new facilities manager to oversee properties and started a maintenance department. She’s had maintenance personnel “*working overtime*” to get vacant units ready for new tenants, bringing contract employees in to jump start the process by removing trash left behind and begin cleaning and painting them.

She hired the energy consultant HUD had asked for, brought in interns to assist with calls and processes, and enlisted the Summer Youth Program’s help with a clean up. Five truckloads of sensitive documents were shredded, and a new policy developed for record retention.

New flooring, new elevators and new emergency lighting has been put in, sidewalks and roofs have been repaired, and ADA-compliant sidewalks and railings are being installed. Individuals breaking property rules, especially

drug and weapons offenders, are being evicted. And, perhaps most important, the stack of 2,266 outstanding work orders sitting on McClurg's desk when she took over is down to fewer than 164.

"I live down here, so I see the impact," said Daysha Wade, JMHA's newest board member. *"There's more structure, more organization and all the things that promote housing security for people like me."*

Wade said in her case, crews canvassing public housing units after a bad storm a year or two back decided to check her roof for damage and discovered a hole she didn't even know was there.

"You could have put your fist through it," she said. *"That kind of stuff had gone unnoticed (before)."*

Liz Smith of the JFK Apartments Residents Council said on a scale of 1-10, *"I would have rated (conditions here) a four, that's how bad it was."*

"Floors were filthy...work orders weren't being done," Smith recalled. *"There were so many, people were moving out because they couldn't get anything (fixed).*

"(It felt like)the old regime had abandoned us, they were more worried about themselves than us," Smith said. *"So much has changed, it's unbelievable. We got the help we've needed, finally."*

Smith said there's *"been a lot of work done"* since McClurg took the reins.

"Eighteen months ago I honestly felt like another year the way we were going, the only thing that would save us was a wrecking ball, there was no maintenance being done," said Mike Zorne of the resident council, pointing out that when power to their building went out in the middle of the night a few months back, McClurg, Maintenance Director Bob Ribar and Operations Director Susie Barnette *"were all down here"* with the residents, he said.

"And when the building up in Toronto got flooded, they all went up there and worked."

Morelli said the new mindset has won over critics who felt the new director should have been promoted from within. He said McClurg knew *“she was stepping into a hornet’s nest”* when she took the job, but was focused on *“moving JMHA forward and not living in the past.”*

“Management has changed,” he added. *“They’re working as a team and working hard, you can see the whole environment is different. We’ve got good leadership pulling the best out of employees.”*

McClurg admits there’s been a noticeable change in the temperature among residents.

“It’s definitely not the angry mob mentality anymore,” she said. *“I think people realize that our job is to provide safe and affordable housing, not for people to be treated badly or properties run down.”*

McClurg, though, insists it’s the *“team”* working together that’s making life better for people living in public housing.

“It’s not one person,” she reiterated. *“I can’t fix the housing authority by myself, it can’t be done. I think what happened was apathy had set in, but we have a great team here now — we’re on one mission, we have one goal,”* she said. *“Our motto is ‘teamwork makes the dream work.’”*

McClurg said the biggest difference she’s seen over the past 18 months is *“just the change in attitude in the people who live in JMHA properties and the shift in mentality from the JMHA staff.”*

“We’re really on a mission down here,” she said. *“We refuse to be troubled or substandard, we just won’t accept it. We have a ways to go to get out of that, but I think people feel there’s light now at the end of the tunnel.”*

“I’m not going say we’re where we need to be yet, because we’re not. But now we have goals, we have plans for the future.”
