

July 14, 2009

HOPE VI Event

Thank you everyone for coming today.

We are here today to celebrate publication of a remarkable book, *From Despair to HOPE*, edited by Henry Cisneros and Lora Engdahl. It is a Brookings book, so given the economy, buy early and buy often.

The book provides a full, fair, grounded, 360 degree assessment of the HOPE VI program, generally considered to be one of the most successful urban redevelopment initiatives in the past half century.

In little more than 15 years, HOPE VI tore down and redeveloped hundreds of the most distressed public housing projects in the country.

It is widely considered the most ambitious focused urban regeneration effort since the 1960s because it radically remade places that were essentially “warehouses for the very poor” and, in the process, increased opportunity in dozens of distressed city neighborhoods characterized by lawlessness and decline.

Like most transformative investments, it has not been without controversy ... and the book airs a wide range of views about the highs and the lows of this effort.

Yet this event is not only about what happened under HOPE VI.

The policy ideas examined in this book are timely and relevant and literally in play this month ... since Congress is now considering the FY 2010 budget request for the Choice Neighborhoods initiative, which builds on HOPE VI effort, taking it beyond public housing and linking it closely with school reform and early childhood interventions.

To illuminate the retrospective and the prospective, we are joined by two HUD Secretaries ... Henry Cisneros, who oversaw the initial implementation of HOPE VI during his tenure from 1993 to 1996 and Shaun Donovan, who has proposed the Choice Neighborhoods initiative.

Henry will speak first about the lessons unveiled by this book, followed by Shaun who will lay out his vision going forward.

Both of these men are visionaries, innovators and expert practitioners of the art of getting big things done and breaking conventional molds. They are true intellectuals who believe in evidence and evaluation and rigorous thought. They are also friends and mentors who have contributed substantially to the evolution of my program at Brookings.

It is my privilege to introduce Secretary Cisneros, whose background and biography is well known to people in this room.

As you know, Secretary Cisneros took office in January 1993 only several months after HOPE VI was initially authorized in the 1992 Housing Act.

At the time, the path of the program was still to be defined. Was HOPE VI merely a souped up reconstruction effort? Was it mainly about providing residents with a comprehensive package of services ... much in vogue at the time?

In four years at HUD, Secretary Cisneros made HOPE VI his own.

He took a program initially intended to transform public housing and used it to transform neighborhoods.

He positioned the initiative squarely around the big issues: the negative implications of concentrated poverty for work and opportunity and safety, the broader possibilities of economic integration and family mobility, the economic role and function of inner cities within metropolitan economies.

In the grand tradition of FDR, he smartly and constantly tinkered with the program design, learning as he went, emphasizing new innovations like new urbanist design, mixed income tenancy, the nexus between housing reconstruction and school reform or welfare to work or community safety. Henry, in short, pushed integrative thinking and action before it was cool.

In the process, he catalyzed the creation of a new kind of public housing and a new kind of public housing agency, with a 21st century ethic of management and governance and private sector engagement.

And all of this was done with a level of care and sensitivity for the people and places affected that is a model for any public servant, elected or appointed.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Henry Cisneros.