

Podcast Interview Transcript

Becky Dennison, Nicole Vaughn

In each volume of the *Journal*, the editors select one article for our Beyond the Manuscript post-study interview with the authors. Beyond the Manuscript provides the authors the opportunity to tell listeners what they would want to know about the project beyond what went into the final manuscript. The associate editors who handled the articles conduct our Beyond the Manuscript interviews. This edition of Beyond the Manuscript features Becky Dennison, author of *Organizing for Health Communities: A Report from Public Housing in Los Angeles*, and Special Issue guest editor Nicole Vaughn.

Nicole Vaughn:

Hi Becky. Can you talk a little bit more and provide a summary of your project including the purpose and the results to orient the listeners to the work?

Becky Dennison:

Our project highlighted the community organizing and community engagement work of the Los Angeles Human Right to Housing Collective in public housing communities in Los Angeles, and it's a case study of two years of our work in building a coalition across public housing communities, which in Los Angeles as well as other places have significant racial and ethnic and language and particularly geography in Los Angeles barriers to working together and to creating a citywide coalition. It was our intent to build the citywide coalition, engage community leaders in the broad community health issues in their own communities as well as in public housing communities broadly throughout the city.

Some of the outcomes were our initial successes in doing that coalition building, leadership development, and community organizing, where we begin to have some policy impacts on the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, and starting to shift the dynamic from basic community engagement or community outreach to real deep community engagement and listening to community members and shifting Housing Authority policies based on their opinions and positions. We were able to address some issues around health within people's units. There was an issue around very high maintenance fees and folks not being able to get the repairs that were needed to keep their homes healthy and safe and we were able to reduce and eliminate many of those.

We were also able to get the Housing Authority to slow down if not temporarily stop the efforts to privatize public housing and that's really a core issue for our coalition is keeping public housing in the public domain with very strong protections and deep affordability and not subject to market forces. So it's a longer-term effort to build deep and broad community health in each of the communities as well as impact the citywide policies that promote tenant engagement in community health.

Nicole Vaughn:

So Nicholas Dahmann is not able to be on this podcast today. Can you describe a little bit about your partnership and your work with him over the course of the project?

Becky Dennison:

Nicholas Doman is a PhD student at the University of Southern California, which is located in South Central L.A. and right in the heart of Los Angeles, and was very interested in doing some studies around gentrification and public space and access to public housing and public space more broadly. He was a volunteer with the Los Angeles Community Action Network, which is my organization, at the time when the Human Rights Housing Collective was in its formation stages.

He wanted to come and do on-the-ground work that supported community leadership and community organizing so that he would have a much better sense to drive his long-term academic research. He played a very core role in helping with coordination efforts, providing the basic research that helped to educate tenants, and then more recently has become less of an active partner on a day-to-day basis but still helping a lot with the research, data, community survey projects, things like that, that bring those academic and research skills into the community.

Nicole Vaughn:

You described in the manuscript the influence of the United Nations Special Rapporteur. Can you talk more about that?

Becky Dennison:

Sure. UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing visited the United States for the first time on an official visit and we were in Los Angeles to be one of the cities that she visited, and really what it did was provide an opportunity for housing groups that have worked together for a long time but in different ways and not necessarily on an intensive coalition building way to come together over a couple month period and really make sure that the UN Special Rapporteur could see, hear, feel, touch the housing violations in our city. So we had to do that in a relatively short period of time as well as using the human rights frame so that community leaders and impacted residents were telling the story to the special Repertoire.

It really brought together a group of folks who had been engaged in community organizing and leadership development and could bring really these different aspects of the housing crisis in Los Angeles together and tell this story of the violations of the human rights housing. Through that process we realized that it was really powerful for folks that were involved, but it's also an important way to frame the housing crisis and build more community based power in Los Angeles to really change these things. The city is a gigantic city both geographically and population-wise, and so we really needed to take these folks, these organizations that were doing great neighborhood based organizing and link those things together to really have a strong citywide voice.

Nicole Vaughn:

You described that the collective was pretty large in terms of representing a number of different public housing communities. Can you talk a little bit about how that was an asset and also how it might have been a challenge in doing the work that you were doing?

Becky Dennison:

Our first issue of focus in the collective was to start organizing around the efforts to privatize public housing. Amongst the organizations involved I think we had a base of active tenants in probably three or four public housing communities. There are 15 public housing communities in Los Angeles and we wanted to have at least half involved to start, and so we did additional outreach and engagement and connecting with resident leaders in different communities and now we've got eight active tenant committees in public housing communities that also then meet as a committee of a collective across the communities.

It's just been first of all an amazing asset in terms of impact on housing authority policy because everything was being done similar to our community based organization work, sort of development by development. Also the Housing Authority was kind of the holder of the majority of information and knowledge. So they may present to the Resident Advisory Committee or something like that, so this was a way for tenants to start to share information, what were they hearing, what were they seeing from the Housing Authority, what were they seeing in their communities that was common, and what were citywide policies that could address those things as opposed to kind of piecemealing them together, and really shifted like I said earlier the power dynamic of residents who were really deeply engaged, highly educated, and had a set of collective demands that they could present both to Housing Authority staff and the commission.

I mean there certainly are challenges as well and we need to make sure that we always have translation and interpretation services available at every meeting. There's literally probably 50 miles between some of the developments, so sort of where do we meet, how do we do transportation, so there are some challenges, but the assets and the outcomes far outweigh those challenges.

Nicole Vaughn:

When you described in the paper the collective committees that were finally formed, I was surprised to see that "homelessness" did not remain a topic of focus. Can you describe why?

Becky Dennison:

When I saw that question I was kind of dismayed at us and the capacity issue. So, homelessness does absolutely remain a topic of focus for us. We have the largest homeless population in the country in Los Angeles and where we are located the Los Angeles Community Action Network in downtown has the largest concentration of homelessness in the country. So it does remain a topic of focus for us. It does remain a priority. What we haven't been able to do is form a citywide committee.

So amongst the active collective members, L.A. CAN at this time is the only organization that has an active base of residents who are organized and engaged, and so we don't yet have a citywide committee, but we are working toward that. So the issue was the capacity of the organizations, the conditions in each committee where people are organized. Some folks had a high rate of homelessness and some areas not as much, so it does remain a policy focus for us. It has always stayed at the top of our platform. We speak out collectively as organizations around homeless policy, around preventing the criminalization of homelessness, but we don't yet have a standing committee or a citywide voice on that issue.

Nicole Vaughn:

Okay. So the paper also described a very resident-focused and resident-led initiative. Can you describe a little bit more about the role of the academic partner in your work?

Becky Dennison:

There are other academic partners besides Nicholas who we talked about. I think the role of the academic partners is really to help provide kind of the broader policy analysis, to help provide information around for example privatization policies nationwide. We had a group of students from UCLA who were in one of our partners' class, Jackie Leavitt, who did a lot of research on for example the Moving to Work program in other cities because that was one of the policies being debated in Los Angeles and helped in a very short period of time to add that capacity so that we could then analyze what had happened in other cities and shape the demands and recommendations here in Los Angeles. So the academic partners as well as the staff of the organizations try to provide a support role, try to stand side-by-side with folks in full kind of support and solidarity with the resident-led voice and the demands that come out of the resident committees.

Nicole Vaughn:

You described also some leadership development activities. Could you talk a little bit more specifically about what was done?

Becky Dennison:

Within each member organization in the collective as well as in the collective committees we focus a lot on different types of training and education and leadership workshops, and so we train on things from tenant rights to the history of public housing policy to the role of tenant landlord laws in terms of the history of Los Angeles and kind of the impacts on the overall political setting in L.A. We do a lot of political education around decision-making and who controls which decisions, and then the key part is then creating opportunities. I should say also we do trainings just on community organizing as well and making sure that we're also broadening the base of community organizers in our communities, not just members.

Then the key to the leadership development is then to have continual opportunities for folks to be able to put this new or refreshed or enhanced knowledge and skills into practice, and so homeless residents lead meetings, and they lead public testimony. We'll do delegations to a few elected officials or to the Housing Authority. We have regular meetings with Housing Authority leadership and so that as we're all kind of learning and expanding our knowledge base, expanding our skill base together, there are opportunities for folks to be out front and really putting those things into practice.

Nicole Vaughn:

I was really excited to see that the human rights framework was really a focus of your work and how it was intertwined with health. How do you plan to continue promoting health and housing in the communities surrounding the many housing developments that you are a part of?

Becky Dennison:

We generally plan to continue with the focus we've had over the last couple years in developing the collective. We feel like the human rights frame is so important because communities, families, individuals don't live in issue-based silos. So one of the key pieces of the human rights framework is that rights are interdependent and intertwined and so we can't be thinking about housing in isolation or health in isolation or the broader community health and resources in isolation. So we just plan to continue to expand and build capacity in communities.

Becky Dennison:

One thing we didn't talk about in the paper because it was really focused on public housing but it's also about having our committees focusing on specific types of housing because the policy and the funding and those decisions are driven in that way, but really the purpose of the collective then is for folks across the city who may live in rent stabilized housing, who may be currently homeless or formerly homeless, who were living in public housing or in Section 8, that while the housing policy is different, people's lives are not different. There's a real focus as well on bringing the different policy area committees together, and that gets at what we were talking around homelessness as well, and so everyone that's engaged in the collective is focused on the human rights to health and housing and really understands kind of the core issues and the core focus of how to change those things in Los Angeles.

I think one thing we have been focusing on more and plan to do as well is to be able to bring the entire membership together on a more regular basis and make sure that we're challenging ourselves to get out of the silo-based approach. We actually just had a citywide human rights convening with folks working on criminal justice, transit racism, and a variety of human rights issue areas. So expanding the collective even further across issue areas to have this really strong human rights voice in Los Angeles.