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## Where the Other Half Lives: An Insider Works to Bolster the Projects

By [MANNY FERNANDEZ](#)

When Tino Hernandez looks back, he dwells not on the drugs and the crime in his old Lower East Side neighborhood, but on the stability of the Jacob Riis Houses that he knew as a teenager.

For several years in the 1960s, he lived with his father in a red brick building at 108 Avenue D, part of the sprawling public housing complex named for the photojournalist who wrote “How the Other Half Lives.”

These days, Mr. Hernandez, 57, is more than a former tenant of the New York City Housing Authority. He is the chairman. And he remembers one thing most vividly about the Jacob Riis Houses, which were completed in 1949: the friendliness of his 11th floor neighbors.

“You had African-Americans, Puerto Ricans,” he said. “You had Italians, you had Jews. We all lived on the same floor, and we kind of had a multiethnic kind of social network.”

But times have changed at the Jacob Riis Houses.

A curse word is scrawled in pen on the door of Mr. Hernandez’s old apartment. A black blotch of graffiti has been burned onto a hallway ceiling with a lighter. A dirty futon cushion was abandoned in an elevator the other day, and the building’s front door was jammed and broken.

On the 13th floor, Deborah Soto, 48, lives in an apartment where the walls have been damaged from water leaks and duct tape holds a window frame together.

“Many years ago, this was the best building out here,” Ms. Soto said. “It’s frustrating.”

Mr. Hernandez has led the Housing Authority for seven years, and for much of that time he has presided over a financial crisis that residents say has contributed to the deterioration at Jacob Riis and the city’s 342 other public housing complexes.

With more than half of its budget coming from the federal [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#), the Housing Authority has been hit hard by cuts in its share of federal subsidies in recent years. Its budget deficit this fiscal year is \$195 million.

In response, Mr. Hernandez has helped the agency reduce spending by a total of \$527 million over the last five years. He has raised rents for thousands of households and increased the fees tenants pay for some services. Last year, the agency eliminated 73 management jobs. In February, it cut an additional 427 positions, including accountants, construction project managers and secretaries.

“We’ve been able to make tough choices with the guiding principle that we were going to protect core services, that we were going to continue to preserve our housing,” Mr. Hernandez said.

Though he is often making unpopular choices and decisions, Mr. Hernandez has been praised by housing advocates and elected officials for stabilizing the agency’s financial condition and preserving the city’s public housing stock at a time when his counterparts around the country have been demolishing or privatizing their buildings.

“This is less about Tino and more about the growing deficit for public housing and the sources of that deficit,” said David R. Jones, president of the Community Service Society, a nonprofit antipoverty group. “Tino, to his credit, has finessed this relatively well.”

Mr. Hernandez’s job as public housing’s unofficial accountant is an unlikely role for a social worker who served as commissioner of the city’s Department of Juvenile Justice under Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#). He was appointed by Mr. Giuliani to lead the Housing Authority in 2001, and was reappointed by Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#).

He describes himself as a late bloomer who lacked direction after high school and worked in the substance abuse treatment field before deciding to seriously pursue a college degree. By the time he obtained his bachelor of science degree from [Adelphi University](#) in Garden City, N.Y., in 1986, he was in his mid-30s. “Never in a million years would I have imagined that my life would come full circle,” he said.

As chairman of the largest public housing system in the country — with 408,000 residents in 2,600 buildings — he keeps such a low public profile that even some of those residents have never heard of him. He often lets slip that he was sworn in as chairman on April Fool’s Day, 2001.

“He’s not a limelight guy,” said Jerilyn Perine, executive director of the nonprofit Citizens Housing and Planning Council and a former commissioner of the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development. “He’s not a big self-promoter. I think he’s been more effective as a result.”

The Housing Authority’s national reputation as a successful model of public housing, however, is often at odds with the experiences of its tenants. Many of them complain about conditions and the pervasiveness of crime.

Residents of the Jacob Riis Houses spoke of drug dealing at Mr. Hernandez's old building. Rick Delgado, 52, used to wear a chain his wife gave him before she died, but no longer. "I don't want to get into a confrontation," he said.

At Brooklyn public housing complexes, March was a violent month. Two women were raped at the Van Dyke Houses; a 29-year-old man was charged in connection with the attacks. A bullet went through an apartment window, wounding a 9-year-old girl at the [Langston Hughes](#) Houses. A 27-year-old mother of three was shot and killed as she chatted with neighbors outside Stuyvesant Gardens.

Mr. Hernandez noted that crime has been down in public housing, as in the rest of the city. "Over all, I would say that public housing is a lot safer than it was maybe 15 years ago, 20 years ago," he said, "but we recognize that we still want to be able to reduce crime as well."

Crime is only one concern for residents. Keith Massey, 56, a longtime tenant at the [Abraham Lincoln](#) Houses in East Harlem, said the condition of the buildings and the grounds has worsened. "The stairs are not the way they should be," said Mr. Massey, a member of the grass-roots group Community Voices Heard. "The halls are not the way they should be."

Mr. Hernandez said the agency had tried to improve conditions and its response time to maintenance complaints; it has added a new 311-style call center for residents to request repairs. And in cutting staff, he said, the agency has tried to protect essential services, like building and elevator maintenance, while keeping the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment at \$281 a month. The Housing Authority's operating budget this year is \$2.8 billion, a slight increase from last year's \$2.7 billion. While the budget has remained roughly the same, federal support has not.

From 2001 to 2008, the Housing Authority lost a total of \$611 million in federal financing, money it was eligible for under a HUD spending formula but did not receive because of shortfalls in Congressional appropriations.

At the same time, the authority's energy, pension and labor expenses continue to rise, even as demand for public housing grows, with more than 125,000 families on the waiting list. Since 2003, the agency has eliminated more than 2,000 positions. In addition, 19 community centers, including 9 in Brooklyn and 5 in the Bronx, are scheduled to close and be consolidated into existing centers; the agency described the centers that are to be closed as "underutilized."

Mr. Hernandez "has the toughest job next to the mayor," said Gregory Floyd, president of Local 237 of the [Teamsters](#) union, which represents Housing Authority groundskeepers and other workers. He said he did not blame Mr. Hernandez for the authority's budget woes. "He's trying to run an operation without any funding," he said.

Mr. Hernandez has been successful in lobbying state leaders to increase their financial aid. Last year, he and public housing advocates persuaded the State Legislature and the governor to raise the so-called shelter allowance for public housing tenants on public assistance. (For years private landlords were paid more for tenants on public assistance than public housing authorities were.) The change will bring the agency an additional \$47 million a year by 2010, when it is fully phased in.

Other political battles have been less successful. While the majority of the city's public housing was built by the federal government, there are also 15 housing developments operated by the Housing Authority that were built by the state; these are, for the most part, no longer subsidized. Last year, the agency asked state officials for \$62 million to operate those complexes, and received only \$3.4 million. This year, the governor's budget included no money for these complexes.

"Let me put it this way," Mr. Hernandez recently told a group of managers in a leadership training program at [Baruch College](#)'s School of Public Affairs. "I think I'm making it easier for whoever succeeds me. They will blame me for the things that didn't get done and take credit for all the things I got done."