



## On 75th anniversary, Stamford's Charter Oak Looks to Future

Maggie Gordon | September 20, 2014

**STAMFORD** -- When Tahmina Noor moved with her family to the Vidal Court public housing project near Stamford Hospital, she was afraid of the environment outside the brick-walled apartment that sheltered her family.

"A lot of people told us not to go there because of the violence and the shooting," Noor said.

Her mom would supervise her as she waited for the school bus, out of fear for her daughter's safety.

"It was scary there, and all the guys who lived there were scary," said Noor, who came to the United States from Bangladesh with her family when she was in her early teens. "If I walked by, they would say stuff to you like, 'Hey, can you come to my house?' Things like that, which is scary."

That was less than a decade ago, yet things are vastly different for Noor's family, and for Vidal Court.

Now 21, Noor lives with her parents and brothers in the newly constructed Fairgate community, where the townhouses are bright and have nicely landscaped surroundings, the streets are clean and Noor feels safe walking around on her own.

For its part, Vidal Court has been torn down and is being replaced with housing similar to Fairgate, which is built on the site of the former Fairfield Court public housing project.

It's hard to even comprehend that the organization that owned and operated the dark foreboding brick buildings that used to be Vidal Court is the same one that has created Fairgate, which looks more like it could serve as a set for a movie about an idyllic suburb. But they're both the product of Stamford's housing authority, Charter Oak Communities. The differences between the two, and between Noor's old home and her new one, are part of the greater narrative of Charter Oak's evolution.



Now celebrating its 75th anniversary, Charter Oak is less focused on counting the candles on its cake and more on the direction it's heading in now, said Executive Director Vin Tufo.

Back when Charter Oak first launched, the focus was about infrastructure: Putting roofs over people's heads. But with separate units sharing dark staircases and walkways, Tufo said public housing around the nation found itself struggling with the fact that residents didn't have what he calls "defensible space" -- private entrances they could claim as their own, keep safe and have pride in.

"In the best of times, it's really not that important because everyone has the general sense that they're all sort of in it for the community, but as the community undergoes stress and people begin using that property for things that they really shouldn't be, then it's very difficult to secure that space and no one really owns it," Tufo said. "If no one really feels it belongs to them, then it doesn't generate that feeling of a safe space they can take pride in."

It's a simple concept, and one that's at the heart of the path Charter Oak is walking now. In Fairgate, there are private entrances for each townhouse, with manicured lawns and clean sidewalks. "It's so important that any housing we provide for the community would be something that anyone would be proud to live in," he said. "Pride leads to dignity, leads to a real sense of ownership and belonging. And that leads to strong communities. So residents feel that when they come home, it's to a safe place and someplace they feel proud of -- somewhere they'd invite someone in."

In its early days, Charter Oak was a "fairly basic housing provider." But now, Tufo said the entire mission has shifted to "engage residents in the community, in terms of where they live, how they live and in strengthening their connections so they don't feel that they're in any way missing what the real opportunities of living in Stamford are."

More recently, the organization has focused on the personal development and well being of its residents, providing a variety of on-site support for residents. Resident service coordinators get to know the people who live in Charter Oak properties, and coach residents through struggles like trying to cope with student debt, family issues or job hunting.

"A resident service coordinator can help you make sense out of that situation," Tufo said, noting that the coordinators are more like coaches than traditional case managers. They're another link connecting residents to their community. "They can help you understand loan mitigation services, and if you need further employment counseling or training services, they can help you connect with that."

It's another ring in the universe of needs Charter Oak is trying to address. These kinds of services help to ensure that residents who need services at one point in their life can have ample opportunities to make leaps to new goals.

"From the standpoint of self-realization, what we hope is that residents are able to raise their families in our communities, and eventually move on to buy homes, live in private housing and become more self-sufficient," he said. "We hope that their kids go to college. There are many things this can help them reach, things that can accrue over time and reset the needle."

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