

Sep. 25, 2014 12:49 pm

ACHIEVEability Forms Strategic Partnership with Mission First Housing to Stabilize Operations



By Alex Vuocolo / STAFF

The West Philadelphia-based social service provider and affordable housing developer [ACHIEVEability](http://www.achieveability.org/index.php) (<http://www.achieveability.org/index.php>) is set to become an affiliate of Mission First Housing (<http://missionfirsthousing.org/>) in an effort to preserve itself and improve operations.

Mission First Housing, which manages affordable homes across the mid-Atlantic region and is headquartered in Center City, will become the parent company of the formerly independent nonprofit and will take over its housing and real estate operations. ACHIEVEability will maintain a board and continue to do its own fundraising, but staff and oversight will be gradually integrated.

The merger — or “strategic partnership,” as both organizations prefer to call it — was the result of many months of consideration and due diligence on both sides.

For ACHIEVEability, the decision came down to survival.

Interim CEO Susan Patton joined the organization in May 2013, and part of her role was to help choose the next CEO. Patton and the board of directors realized during this process, which involved some difficult self-analysis, that they had to make a choice: partner with another organization or risk shutting down after 34 years serving the city’s most vulnerable citizens.

“The status quo wasn’t an option,” Patton said.

Deciding which organization to partner with required understanding of where ACHIEVEability needed help and what it wanted to be.

ACHIEVEability made its name through programs that assist families in education, finance and parenting so they can break the cycle of poverty. Housing was always essential to this model, and was what made it unique, according to Patton, but it was not the organization’s strong suit.

The organization’s financial woes in large part came from problems with its housing operations, explained Patton, brought on by the 2008 recession. It was susceptible to the same market forces that collapsed banks and left families drowning in mortgage payments.

“We had lost some skills, resources and credibility, and that means a lot in the real estate business,” said Patton.

She added that the organization did not have money to rehire the staff it needed to effectively continue its housing operations, which manages 158 units in Philadelphia.

"I know that they were hit pretty hard, as many nonprofits in Philadelphia and across the country were, by the recession in 2008 and 2009," said Mark Deitcher, director of business development at Mission First Housing.

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Mission First Housing, which has actively pursued partnerships around the region, was approached by ACHIEVEability about a teaming up.

"We have a great model here in terms of operations — clients operation, real estate development and property management," said Deitcher. "We felt that we could bring that expertise to them, and in turn, we felt we could stabilize an organization that's doing great work in the city of Philadelphia."

Deitcher added that he thinks ACHIEVEability's mixed-model could be used in other Mission First Housing programs and affiliates.

"A lot of nonprofits are in a state where they're struggling a little bit financially, and they keep on doing what they're doing because they've always done it," said Patton. "I think what I'm proud of the organization and the board for is that they were willing to challenge the status quo, and really ask 'what's the best thing for the parents we serve, what's the best thing for the community we serve?'"

Image via Mission First Housing's website (<http://missionfirsthousing.org/missionfirstacha/>)

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