



Abstract

This is the OPRHC response to the Village staff response to the first corrective action plan.

Athena Williams
awilliams@oprhc.org



May 25, 2024

Ahmad Zayyad
Deputy Village Manager
Village of Oak Park
123 Madison St.
Oak Park, IL 60302

RE: Oak Park Regional Housing Center (OPRHC) Response to VOP Staff concerns regarding letter dated February 16, 2024

Delivery Method: Electronic Mail

Dear Deputy Manager:

Below you will find the OPRHC responses to concerns expressed by the Village staff team. While I responded to each comment, I would like an opportunity for our teams to come together to work to put a plan in place together for each question and let this be the beginning to develop a truth based partnership (TBP) in which we can spend time to address each response and lay out a plan that will identify strategies which will begin to build relationships that will be based on transparency, dialogue and mutual understanding.

Although I have willfully made myself available and responded to each question presented to me, through the past 10 months this process came across very systemically oppressive to me as an individual, to the OPRHC board of directors and staff, and to the clients who seek to gain entry into the Village of Oak Park causing much harm, which I believe was not the intent of the Village staff and or its Board of Trustees.

These are the very norms that OPRHC works every day to eliminate. Even though it has been a very inequitable process, we should work together to restore the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in such processes laying a groundwork in case something of this nature should happen again, setting an example as to how we can work together to address corrective actions and imbalances between the funder and the grantee. I look forward to moving forward.

Sincerely,
Athena Williams
Athena Williams
Executive Director

CC: OPRHC Board of Directors; VOP Staff and Trustees

SUMMARY

The Oak Park Regional Housing Center submitted a response to the Village letter dated February 16, 2026. The response detailed their corrective action plan and provided supplemental information. Below summaries Village staff response to the plan articulated by the Housing Center. *Because there was no timeline in the letter dated February 16, 2024, and because the Oak Park Regional Housing Center (OPRHC) is avidly working to address this issue to move forward, we believed it would be lucrative to turn around a response within two weeks (this was 17 calendar days).*

VILLAGE STAFF FEEDBACK WITH OPRHC REPLIES:

Clear plan for the OPRHC Board of Director's financial oversight.

The Housing Center mentions the organization moving forward in the direction of re-structuring the agency. The letter discusses the center is in the process of updating the existing accounting and financial procedures. There is no mention of the timeframe for the completion of this process, nor in what direction the agency is gearing towards. *In the process means we are working on these issues. If VOP would like to provide a timeframe, we are open to discuss and work toward those goals.*

The letter also discusses the Board of Directors is in the process of establishing a Finance Committee and its procedures; however, there is no mention of the timeline for the completion of this process. *During the April 5th meeting, it was stated we would have the Finance committee in place in 30 days as we already have various committees that we were recruiting from. As fact, we were prepared to announce the finance committee members at the April 30th meeting that was postponed. The new Board Treasurer was on the May 23rd call.*

The response highlights "the Executive Director will continue to provide the Board of Directors with a bi-weekly agency check-in. The Board of Directors will continue to have monthly board meetings with an agenda that includes the E.D. report and previous months financials." Village staff do not agree that this response to the Housing Center's Board of Directors financial oversight is sufficient. The Board of Directors receiving the previous month financials at the monthly board meeting, is the current structure in which the Housing Center has been functioning and has proven to not be sufficient financial oversight of the organization. *While we understand the hesitancy of the VOP staff, please note, OPRHC is following a best practice for a not for profit entity. OPRHC financial procedures have successfully passed the HUD financial assessment. The issue at hand (late payroll to staff) described as a financial oversight insufficiency was a cash flow issue which should be described and determined by how payments are received from funders which is an uncontrolled function. As previously stated, OPRHC made multiple attempts to secure lines of credit, however, the timing for receiving approved funding, the timing for receiving the lines of credit did not line up with the staffing at the time. Decisions made were confirmed by Payroll Consultant, Board of Directors, accountants, and ultimately with agreements from staff.*

Cont'd.

Identify immediate cooperation and responsiveness with the Village.

The Housing Center suggests a text message is sent for there to be immediate responsiveness. The response recommends that all email communications include the Executive Director, Michael Stewart, Associate Director, and a Housing Center Board Member. Village staff felt this response to be insufficient. As of October of 2023, Village staff have sent all email communications to the Executive Director and Housing Center Board members and have had difficulties in cooperation and responsiveness. There is also reference to occasional requests of additional time to support delivery of information without providing a duration. Village staff recommend that the Housing Center adheres to the timelines and due dates outlined in the funding agreement. *It would be beneficial to all parties if VOP staff could be more descriptive regarding asks of OPRHC. We do the best of our ability to reply, to adhere to timelines and due dates. When we are unable to adhere to specific requests, we will provide detailed durations. Unfortunately, considering capacity, funding restraints and the timing, there will be times when requests will be made, particularly when we are seeking support. If we can come together and constructively work through what are described as difficulties in cooperation, or what could be miscommunications, it would be a better environment for all parties involved.*

Intent to participate with the Homes for a Changing Region Study and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Assessment (at the completion of the studies).

In the response, the Housing Center discussed the creation of a committee in the organization that would work with Village staff to develop a framework of the strategies discussed in the outcome of the studies for implementation in Oak Park. The response focuses on five (5) key goals in which they aspire to collaborate with the Village for the Housing Center to execute.

Several of the goals listed have been previously discussed with the Housing Center, such as a payment assistance program, renovation of older housing stock, and working with the Village to acquire homes to renovate and sell them at an affordable rate. Previously, Village staff did not recommend funding these initiatives, as part of their annual general funding agreement, due to the high turnaround of the organization and Village staff having concerns with the Housing Center's capacity to effectively execute the initiatives. *It is my hope that we can have a meeting to recall the conversation about the goals listed above as this was not discussed but rather this was written in OPRHC's Affordable Housing Application in which we never received a reply. The high staffing turnaround was due to the abrupt pause in funding which meant we had to downsize and yet it was again not discussed. It is my hope that we can level set with funding and work through how the Village staff can work with OPRHC to help build our capacity around our institutional knowledge to participate to advance the goals of the Housing Study.*

The response also discusses the Housing Center addressing barriers to renting, in which there is a proposal to manage a rental counseling program. Other organizations in Oak Park offer various rental assistance programs, that the Village currently funds. Village staff believe it would be most effective for the Village to focus on strengthening its current programs, as a result of the Housing Study and DEI Assessment, rather than duplicating existing programs. *As you stated there are other organizations in Oak park that offer various RA programs. Would it be possible to gather all of the partners who offer RA and determine the intersection of OPRHC RA programming along with what is currently being offered? I can assure you know one offers what OPRHC is capable and currently offers to other partners outside of Oak Park. I would also ask in the same vein, what measures can be taken by Village staff to strengthen OPRHC integration and or homeownership programming?*

The Housing Center also mentions a key objective of the organization is to **re-institute** the

integration program to sustain integration throughout the Village. This is a concerning statement, as Village Staff are unaware that the existing affirmative move program is not a current function of the organization. *The comment should have been to “reinvigorate” the existing program.*

While Village staff do believe the current structure of the integration program needs to be updated to reflect the present-day trend of movement in Oak Park, staff is not recommending the Housing Center to structure the revised program alone. *We have often stated that we would bring a committee together to “reinvigorate” the program, based on the housing study as well as past practices.*

Housing Center must identify the racial integration plan and how it concurs with the Village’s goal for affordability.

The Housing Center details their goal to reassess racial integration. The response details their goal to creating a program for property owners to work with under-represented renters. It goes into further detail to discuss the potential dynamics of the program, in which the Housing Center mentions the down payment assistance program. Village staff acknowledge this has been a consistent ask of the Housing Center to create a down payment assistance program. *While propositions have been made regarding a down payment assistance program, the creation of a program takes a substantial amount of time. We were once given a two-month timeframe to create a program as a part of an application process. The creation of such program can take up to twelve months from planning to implementation. In the event OPRHC should create such a program, we welcome being contracted to do so and not subjected to an application process.*

However, Village staff have not recommended funding for the initiative historically due to the staff’s concern of capacity and proper use of funds. *OPRHC has not been sited for improper use of funds, or unlawful use of funds. If you have this proof, please provide details. Also share why the VOP staff is concerned about proper use of funds. Although the KPW report stated VOP was in receipt of bills from across the entire agency, the amounts were not included in the invoice request, and I was always told by VOP staff “submit all of the proof of payments and we will calculate the the funding amount”. There was never any type of format provided to OPRHC as a template for submitting requests for funding, in many cases, receipts that were submitted were higher than the requested payment. Because OPRHC has the experience and knowledge base, we are open to the Village staff altering their apprehensions and working with OPRHC to create these programs while helping us build our capacity.* Furthermore, there is no correlation between the down payment assistance (DPA) program and with racial integration. *Because racial integration is at the core of the mission of OPRHC, DPA can be planned and implemented in a way to effect and impact racial integration in the community. Again, these are conversations that should be discussed as part of a planning process.*

Housing Center must identify Village involvement with the Center’s operations.

The Housing Center identifies in an effort to sustain community integration, they have created a committee called Cultural Viability Impact (CVI). This new initiative focuses on the cultural impact through affordability and homeownership. The Housing Center recommends to have two (2) Village staff members as part of this committee to work alongside other community residents and the Housing Center to build the framework to sustain a more inclusive community. Village staff concur with this recommendation that Village staff should be involved in this initiative. This also concurs with Village Board direction, of having Village staff involvement with the Housing Center. *OPRHC welcomes this participation. I would also like to add that even though we meet monthly, we should consider creating a formatted agenda that does an indepth review of financials in order to address the concerns with the VOP staff.*

Housing Center must restructure their financial management system to provide accurate, current and complete disclosure of the expenditures of all funds provided by the Village.

In response, the Housing Center states their CPA consultant is re-evaluating the current “classes” within their QuickBooks software. In addition, they are seeking additional funding to have the ability to hire a full-time finance manager for the organization. Village staff found this response to be lacking in a corrective action. As a result of the financial monitoring conducted by the Village staff, Kolnicki Peterson and Wirth, and HUD it was ultimately deemed the organization does not have the proper financial structure to operate. *Per the draft document from KPW, it was clearly stated that they did not have all of the information that they needed. And although OPRHC requested several extensions, it was not realistic to provide all the information that was requested in a two-week period, particularly when they were functioning on agreed to procedures requested from VOP. In addition, OPRHC was asked to prepare and provide information for one year of VOP invoices prior to the meeting, however, each day, a new ask was made. We never received the result of the VOP conducted financial monitoring. The HUD financial monitoring did not state OPRHC does not have the proper financial structure to operate. Please share this documentation.*

The current structure of the financial system does not have the proper checks and balances to keep track of all expenditures. In the response, the Housing Center discusses the organization is following the financial policies which reflect the proper financial oversight of the Housing Center financial team and the OPRHC Board. However, this was proven to be lacking as a result of the most recent three financial monitoring’s conducted of the agency in the last six months. *This is not how this has been interpreted as we followed the agreement and the instructions from the VOP staff. However, in an effort to improve this status moving forward, please suggest another method.*

Housing Center must develop a new reporting (voucher) template to detail expenditures related to the funding agreement.

The Housing Center provided a new reporting template for Village staff consideration. After reviewing, Village staff appreciate the layout of the summary template, as it details the expenses in which the agency is requesting reimbursement. However, the supporting detail is incomplete. *While it is not the responsibility of the grantee to create the voucher template, we were hoping that the VOP staff would provide detailed feedback as to what could be improved moving forward. In the event documentation was missing, that could easily be solved as the template that OPRHC created was organized and clear and focused only on items the Village funds were being expended. We should meet to review these items to eliminate any disconnects.*

The goal of a new reporting template is not to diminish the need of supporting documentation, but rather organize and clearly list the items in which Village funds are being expended. Village staff welcomes the opportunity to meet and discuss the layout and reimbursement style as requested.

The Housing Center must ensure Housing Center staff are paid their wages at the time they are due.

Village staff do not support the recommendation of the Housing Center to furlough staff when the organization does not have sufficient funds to pay the wages due. *As you may know, OPRHC applied for a line of credit with the VOP in 2022 because we were aware of the impending cash flow issue. However, even though the HPAC commission approved the support for OPRHC to have a line of credit through the VOP, the Village staff declined it. If the VOP staff does not support the recommendation to furlough staff, please make a secondary recommendation.* As a second alternative, the Housing Center notes a line of credit that was secured in August 2023, will be utilized to pay staff their wages.

In reviewing of the financials of the organization in August and September of 2023, the organization had expended said line of credit. *No, OPRHC has three separate lines of credit. They were not all expended. We should review these documents so that there is clarity around this issue. In addition, we are still functioning with this line of credit to date to support Live in Oak Park program staff in lieu of past funding which has not been received. Note, in the event funding is not received, OPRHC will have to discharge those employees and end the program.*

The Village has had a turnaround of payment within the same week in which the proper documentation is received to process. *Yes, this has happened and OPRHC expressed appreciation. However, this does not negate the fact that the payments are reimbursements which is cause for delays and the need for a line of credit. As shared with VOP staff in the past, because these are reimbursements, staff is being paid in the rear from the payments.* As the organization's largest funder it is not a correct statement for the Housing Center to note that their staff are not paid wages due to delayed payments from funders. *VOP is the largest funder for the Live in Oak Park program, yet it only funds approximately 60% of the program. When I requested assistance from the Village for a line of credit, I informed the commission as well as the staff that since the COVID pandemic, funding streams had changed and OPRHC needed assistance with cash flow as well as to hire a grant writer to assist with completing grants. We have other government funding that has delays with funding as well, also known as reimbursements.* The Village funds 100% of the Live in Oak Park staff at the Housing Center, between the General Funding Grant Agreement and CDBG Agreement. *No, the Village funds approximately 70% of the Live in Oak Park Staff salary. The program was designed so that 100% of staff salary and portions of Live in Oak Park programmatic operational funding is covered, however, since 2020, there has not been enough funding to cover the program, nor help the program meet the demand of the community.*

Housing Center must identify all funding sources and identify if any Live in Oak Park staff salaries or programmatic expenses are reimbursed through other funding sources.

The Housing Center did not provide this information. *Apologies. However, this information was provided during both VOP financial audits.*

Housing Center must submit their 2023 unaudited financial statements, including statement of income and expenses. These financial statements must breakdown expenses by administration, program and capital expenditures.

The Housing Center provided their unaudited financials. Village staff noted the organization is currently ending the 2023 fiscal year at a net operating loss of \$356,617.29. This net loss includes:

- a) the loss revenue from the Village at a total of \$229,108- *the correct total amount is \$245,848.55 (\$176.250- General Fund; \$69,598.55- CDBG, PY22).*
- b) Cook County at a total of \$26,963.63- *this is incorrect, Cook County made their payment before the end of the year. And we passed our Cook County Financial Audit.*
- c) City of Chicago at \$24,669.66, *this is correct due to the period of the HUD inactivation, however we have been invited back to apply for the next term. And we passed our City of Chicago Financial Audit.*
- d) and IHDA at a total of \$95,642.29- *this is incorrect, these are funds that were returned due to staff decrease, however, IHDA has since amended our contract and provided a \$25,000 increase for PY24 (for a total of \$73,000).*

CONCLUSION- Looking forward to moving forward.