



# Promoting Integration and Prosperity

## The Oak Park Strategy

In 1972, the Oak Park Regional Housing Center began its mission to achieve meaningful and lasting racial diversity in Oak Park. At that time, Oak Park was a middle class community that was 99% white. It was clear to Oak Parkers that divisive phenomena were taking place in the neighborhoods surrounding them. On the west side of Chicago, neighborhoods were rapidly changing from predominantly white to predominantly black. Meanwhile, neighboring western suburbs engaged in hostile practices to keep people of color from moving in.

Oak Parkers chose a different approach. Through the creation of the Housing Center, the community embraced racial change and welcomed people of color. At the same time, the Housing Center led an effort that included a variety of actors to discourage white flight.

The key to this strategy was to encourage people of all races to embrace residential integration. Through the Housing Center as a resource, anyone searching for an apartment in Oak Park would get the assistance in their housing search. That assistance would include encouragement to promote integration within the community.

The program has had remarkable success. Over the past 44 years, racial demographics in Oak Park have approached parity with the demographics of the metropolitan area. Moreover, as people have moved into the community, the Housing Center has helped them make moves that would affirmatively promote integration for 70% of moves made to Oak Park.

The result is that as Oak Park has become more diverse, it has also become better integrated. Unlike many communities that face racial change, Oak Park has never experienced residential segregation. In fact, for the past 20 years, measurements of segregation and isolation show that Oak Park has consistently improved on integration.

The investment to ensure the integration of our housing market has paid many dividends both socially and economically. Housing integration results in integrated schools, businesses networks, and social networks. It fosters a greater sense of community pride, civic participation, and harmony. It provides Oak Park with a unique and desirable brand that reinforces property values. And, it provides a core set of values that inform the vision and aspirations of the community.

Our integration strategy has also been our strategy for prosperity and equity. It has been the foundation to sustaining an open, inclusive, and high-opportunity community that is welcome to and desired by people of all races.



## **How it Works**

The model succeeds by providing a service that works well for both housing seekers and housing providers. From both the supply and demand sides of the housing market, our service provides the most effective way for landlords to find tenants that can afford their apartments and for tenants to find apartments that fit their budget and needs.

Property owners and managers who use our service list the units they have available with us. In addition to basic criteria about rent and number of bedrooms, we collect additional data about the amenities of apartments. We also gain a firm understanding of the criteria that are used in tenant selection. With this information, we can be sure to only provide prospective tenants that meet a landlord's criteria.

This level of information allows us to provide apartment seekers with a tailored set of listings that take into account the amenities they are looking for. Based on their reported income, we can ensure that we do not waste their time by providing them with listings that are outside of their price range. We also ask about their past rental history to determine any issues that might make renting difficult.

With this combination of data, we provide apartment seekers with a set of listings they can afford that also fit their criteria. This simplifies the search by ensuring that the units we provide meet the wishes of the prospective tenant. It also assures the landlord that leads from the Housing Center will be people who can afford the rent and want an apartment with the amenities they offer.

But providing the right unit amenities is not enough. The process also requires a discussion about the location of the unit to overcome hesitancy to move to certain parts of the community. Throughout the history of the Housing Center, housing seekers have consistently demonstrated a reluctance to move to areas where they believe their racial group is under-represented. These preconceptions inform their feelings and considerations about different parts of Oak Park. Our staff provides them with data about the community and information about their own experiences to overcome that reluctance.

## **Intentionality Makes the Difference**

Oak Park remains integrated through intentional efforts. The housing market is a dynamic system. People move regularly, especially renters. A consistent effort remains in place to sustain our integration in Oak Park. By continuing to provide a service that promotes integration in the community, Oak Park remains a place where diversity meets prosperity and inclusion.