

Greystone program expands its vintage housing reach



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APRIL 14, 2015, 2:23 PM

Teaching Chicagoans to spell "greystone" with an "e" rather than an "a" was merely one of the fringe benefits of the Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative, begun in spring 2006 by Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago.

The program's real impact was the many workshops and its ability to help the owners of more than 200 greystones obtain direct and indirect financial assistance so they could improve their limestone-clad homes.

The grant monies are now gone but signs of optimism in the city's housing market are prompting the nonprofit group to retool that effort and offer more technical assistance to owners of not just greystones but other older homes that dominate Chicago's neighborhoods, and particularly on the West and South sides. A full slate of free workshops and free technical assistance are part of the newly named Chicago Greystone & Vintage Home Program.

"We're keeping the greystone as our roots, but we're working on everything," said Matt Cole, program director for Neighborhood Housing Services Redevelopment Corp. "This is about the vintage housing that makes our communities unique. How do we make them vital? How do we help people of all stripes who want to make the West and South sides their home, who want to add their name to the community?"

When the greystone initiative was begun nine years ago by Neighborhood Housing Services and supported by the city and the University of Illinois-Chicago, it was modeled on the city's Historic Chicago Bungalow Initiative. Chicago's housing market was flying high and organizers sought to attract new investment and preserve housing in neighborhoods like North Lawndale, which is home to more than 1,500 greystones.

New investments were made, and new owners moved into neighborhoods. Then the housing market crashed, and areas like North Lawndale were hit hard. By the fourth quarter of 2014, 5.5 percent of addresses in North Lawndale had been vacant two years or longer, according to the most recent information available from the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University. That compared with 2.5 percent for Chicago as a whole.

The housing crisis isn't entirely behind Chicago yet, but the organization is moving forward with a revamped program because it believes more potential buyers have the desire and financial wherewithal to again invest in neighborhoods. It sees the signs of hope in communities like Bronzeville, Chatham, Humboldt Park and Pullman.

"I am more optimistic now than we have been in the last couple years," Cole said. "We're able to see the landscape a little more. In 2009, we didn't know where this was going. We are seeing more people become a bit more comfortable about buying a home and making that investment. Certain neighborhoods that we have are certainly very hard hit, but we're seeing other areas that are picking up again."

In addition to workshops that focus on building history and rehab basics, the initiative will offer personalized on-site consultations on rehab projects, landscaping and energy efficiency. Purchase and rehab loans also will be available to income-eligible consumers.

"We know people want a house that functions for them in a contemporary world, but we also know that people want to respect the character of these properties," Cole said.

There are no income restrictions related to program participation, but it is primarily geared toward people who have already bought properties on the city's South and West sides and plan to live in them. Technical assistance will be offered to local investors on a case-by-case basis.

"We want that owner-occupant, that buyer," Cole said. "We are trying to build healthier, more economically diverse neighborhoods because that's what our neighborhoods need. We want the base of that to be people who are engaged but we need it to be people of all stripes. These buildings require big investments."

The program is funded by the city, the Alphawood Foundation, the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and State Farm Insurance.

For more information visit nhschicago.org/site/3C/category/program_greystone or call 773-329-4111.

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