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Drop in bucket can catalyze recovery

In October, a humble corner of Overtown received a bit of attention. In front of a decaying apartment building, about 25 people watched as David Alexander, executive director of St. John Community Development Corporation, cut a red ribbon with a pair of oversized novelty scissors. This small ceremony marked the start of something big: the deployment of \$89,375,000 in federal funds to develop affordable housing in Miami-Dade County. These funds are intended to stabilize communities that are experiencing especially high rates of foreclosures and plummeting property values.

So what, right? In the face of South Florida's staggering real estate crisis, how far can \$89 million really go? Actually, very far, if we make sure to leverage the tremendous opportunity that these funds have given us.

First of all, the \$89 million in Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds, awarded to a consortium of six nonprofit developers and a local municipality, is a huge achievement. It is the sixth-largest award in the entire nation out of a total of \$2 billion for this Recovery Act program. The grant is a function not only of the disproportionate impact of the recession and foreclosure crisis on South Florida -- it is also a credit to the application prepared by the consortium.

Second, the number of affordable housing units to be produced -- 1,255 -- is significant, for two main reasons. The units will be targeted in a handful of at-risk neighborhoods, maximizing the program's impact. Also, most of the units will be renovations of existing stock. Rehabs represent an important component of affordable housing development that is often more difficult to finance, so this funding is an overdue and badly-needed infusion in homes for low- and moderate-income families.

Third, the community development corporations in the consortium stand to significantly improve their organizational capabilities. The group spans a range of operating budgets and experience, and all are likely to grow and learn through this collaboration. The community development field in Miami-Dade has struggled to overcome grave setbacks in recent history. By rising to this challenge, they can do just that.

Lastly and most importantly, this is an opportunity to leverage serious additional funds for community development in Miami-Dade. The consortium is already negotiating private financing from local lenders for its program. But the opportunity is bigger than that. Much bigger. This is the chance of a generation for local governments, nonprofits and corporations to attract investment in our neglected communities, to reverse the downward spiral of distressed neighborhoods. To do that, all sectors must be engaged in ensuring the consortium's success and in finding ways to build upon it.

The Miami-Dade NSP2 Consortium includes Carrfour Supportive Housing, Little Haiti Housing Association, Neighborhood Housing Services of South Florida, Opa-locka

Community Development Corporation, St. John Community Development Corporation, Urban League of Greater Miami and the city of North Miami.

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