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Researchers Investigate Atlanta Public Housing Relocation from Residents' Perspectives

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ATLANTA — High-rise public housing for senior citizens and disabled individuals should remain in the wake of plans to demolish the last of Atlanta's public housing communities, according to one of the findings in a report issued today (Dec. 1) by Georgia State University researchers.

“Most of the senior high-rise residents do not want to move and many have multiple health and service needs that might not be met once relocated”, say Department of Sociology assistant professors Deirdre Oakley and Erin Ruel, who together led this research initiative.

The study represents one of the only independent research efforts of Atlanta public housing residents in recent years and investigated the residents' experiences and perceptions as they face the prospect of relocation.

Overall, findings emphasize that a one size fits all relocation plan will make moving very difficult for many of the residents. Currently there is only one relocation option: move to private market housing with the help of a Housing Choice voucher subsidy (formerly Section 8).

Key issues facing residents are the prospects that destination neighborhoods may not be as readily accessible to public transportation as public housing; the decreased financial security of subsidized private market housing; the disproportionate amount of poor health among residents and the need to maintain the regular access to healthcare services that they currently have living in public housing; and the fact that many of the senior residents in particular do not want to relocate.

- **Access to Public Transportation.** Public housing residents benefit from being in closer proximity to public transportation networks and thus access to health care and other needed services, compared to neighborhoods where they might possibly move. In fact, about 80 percent of the residents interviewed depend on public transportation.
- **Financial Security.** Living in public housing provides financial security for residents. Findings indicate that residents are able to get by on very limited incomes -- with the average being \$749 to \$763 a month. Moving into private housing — even when subsidized — may not afford residents the same level of financial security.
- **Poor Health.** The study found much higher percentages of people in public housing suffering from chronic health conditions than in the general population.

Thus, regular access to healthcare services is very important to this population. In addition, most were suffering from these conditions before entering public housing, and often entered public housing because of the financial duress involved.

- **Desire to Relocate.** Significant disparities concerning the desire to relocate based on type of public housing community (family versus senior) and age were found. About 62 percent of those in family housing want to move, compared to 34 percent of those in the senior high rises. But even among those residents who want to relocate serious concerns remain about the ability to get to medical care, pay utilities, as well as whether or not there is enough voucher-subsidized housing for everybody moving.

Aside from maintaining the senior high rise housing, the report also recommends preserving at least a portion of the current public housing stock and providing some sort of short-term transitional housing for those who lose their homes and/or jobs, especially during the current economic downturn, to help prevent homelessness.