

http://www.bgdailynews.com/news/housing-authority-draws-attention-of-hud-officials/article_153ce6eb-caf8-5236-8c3a-a063418b8b10.html

Housing Authority draws attention of HUD officials

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com 22 hrs ago

Housing Authority of Bowling Green Executive Director Abraham Williams (right) listens as Housing and Urban Development Regional Administrator Denise Cleveland-Leggett talks Monday to students at the authority's Learning Center.

[Buy Now](#)

[DON SERGENT/dsergent@bgdailynews.com](mailto:DON_SERGENT@dsergent@bgdailynews.com)

Abraham Williams has brought plenty of local and state attention to the Housing Authority of Bowling Green, forming partnerships with local businesses, public school systems and universities in his quest to improve lives.

Now he's gone national.

Denise Cleveland-Leggett, administrator of the Housing and Urban Development regional office in Atlanta, was joined Monday by leaders of the Kentucky HUD office as she toured the Housing Authority offices and Learning Center on Double Springs Road.

It wasn't a social call. Cleveland-Leggett, appointed by HUD Secretary Ben Carson to lead the eight-state Atlanta regional office, was seeking out agencies that fit Carson's vision of going beyond the traditional public-housing role.

She found what she was looking for at the Housing Authority as she visited with students being tutored at the Learning Center and heard about the many innovative programs spearheaded by Williams and his staff.

"What you're doing here is so in keeping with what Secretary Carson wants to do," Cleveland-Leggett said. "I get out to housing authorities throughout the Southeast, but

very few are doing the types of things you're doing to help the entire person. You're doing more than public housing."

Williams, the Housing Authority's executive director for 22 years, was going beyond public housing long before Carson had that vision for HUD.

"Carson's idea is to move people out of public housing," Williams said. "We've been doing that for years. We try to take all their excuses away."

To accentuate what the Housing Authority is doing, Williams had African immigrant Ketty Kisula speak to Cleveland-Leggett and the Kentucky HUD staff members, laying out a history of how she has benefitted from the various programs at the public housing agency.

Kisula, a mother of nine children from the Congo, first sought help from the Family Self Sufficiency program, which led to a job with the Bowling Green Independent School District.

She and her children have been able to get help from the Housing Authority's Build-A-Bed program, and the agency's staff has helped Kisula prepare to apply for U.S. citizenship. Through the Housing Authority's "Live the Dream" home ownership program, Kisula is starting the process of buying her own home.

Kisula's children have benefitted from the Learning Center, which provides tutoring for school-age children and has remained viable largely because of Williams' ability to build community partnerships. One of those partnerships was on display during the HUD officials' visit as students from Western Kentucky University's Gatton Academy for gifted high school students visited the Learning Center to help youngsters.

The Learning Center, buffeted by funding uncertainties over the years, has stayed alive largely because of partnerships.

“Three or four times we’ve almost had to close the doors,” Williams said of the Learning Center. “United Way stepped up, and both local public school districts helped us with \$10,000 donations.

Section 8 Housing Assistance

Application Guide

Learn How To Apply & Check Your Eligibility for Section 8 Housing Near You.



 section-8-housing.org/Apply

“A few years ago, I thought we weren’t going to be able to have our summer program at the Learning Center, then a doctor approached me and gave us \$40,000. A lot of housing authorities have closed down their learning centers, but I don’t want to do that. Education is the only way out for many of these kids.”

Kentucky HUD Field Office Director Michael Browder, who accompanied Cleveland-Leggett on her visit, said the partnerships Williams has forged with local school districts, WKU, Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College and many local businesses have enabled the Housing Authority to be a model for the type of public housing agency Carson envisions.

“He has built public-private partnerships to make sure low-income individuals have the opportunity to improve their lot in life,” Browder said. “It’s not just public housing but an opportunity to give a hand up to those who want to become self-sufficient through education and employment opportunities.

“Bowling Green is absolutely one of the best housing authorities in the country. They’re producing outcomes and improving people’s lives.”

After the Monday visit, Williams now has a new partnership idea that could help him improve more lives. HUD's Carson and entertainer Steve Harvey have talked about plans to establish "vision centers" around the country, teaching STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) skills and computer programming to low-income children.

"Dr. Carson is trying to establish at least nine vision centers around the country," Williams said. "We want to be one of them." **Advertisement**



– Follow business reporter Don Sergent on Twitter @BGDNbusiness or visit bgdailynews.com.

Don Sergent