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**Contact: Richard Muhammad
Chicago Rehab Network
312-663-3936, 773-616-5058 (cell)
E-mail: richard@chicagorehab.org**

Summit seeks to save thousands of south side affordable housing units

The south side of Chicago stands to lose over 9,000 apartments tied to affordable rental housing programs, unless residents, community leaders, public officials and owners get involved, warns the Chicago Rehab Network. The coalition is hosting a free Southside Housing Summit in early June to examine the scope of the problem and possible ways to save dwindling affordable housing.

“With south side real estate speculation soaring, and federal housing agreements expiring over the next four years, a crisis is brewing that could displace thousands of people. Several neighborhood groups we work with asked us to highlight this problem and what can be done about it,” said Kevin Jackson, Chicago Rehab Network executive director. The Southside Affordable Housing Summit will be held Saturday, June 3, at Martin Luther King, Jr. High School, located at 4445 S. Drexel Blvd. The summit will open at 8:30 a.m. and end at 1 p.m.

“Our goal isn’t creation of a new entity, but a desire to help organizations, community and political leaders dealing with housing issues look at how we can protect rental housing public dollars were used to build, finance or maintain,” Jackson explained. The Chicago Rehab Network estimates that 9,000 units of 12,400 units could be lost by 2010, unless federally restricted mortgages and contracts are renewed. The federal government currently has contracts with property owners, who receive subsidies for renting some apartments in their buildings at below market rates. These subsidized apartments are not linked to individual housing vouchers, but are kept affordable by the contracts between owners and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Every contract that expires means fewer options for low- and moderate- income renters, said Jackson.

“We don’t want to lose residents that have long made the south side their home. Affordable rental housing is more important than ever as costs rise and new people move in,” said Mattie Butler, a longstanding activist, who leads Woodlawn East Community and Neighbors.

The summit will include residents, community and political leaders, owners, local federal housing officials, and other stakeholders. The day will feature an opening message from Rep. Bobby L. Rush, who has been active in housing issues in his legislative district, breakout sessions and opportunities to talk to government officials, network with community leaders and dialog with building owners.

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A special session will be devoted to an Illinois law, the Federally-Assisted Housing Preservation Act, which allows tenants to intervene if an owner decides to end affordable rents. Under the law, tenants have to be given 12 month's notice and an option to buy the building to preserve the affordable apartments.

The summit goals are to provide factual information, help community leaders and building owners better understand options and resources available for housing preservation, meet public officials, forge partnerships, and make saving these units part of community planning efforts. Additional summits are being considered to highlight the crisis in other parts of the city.

The Chicago Rehab Network (CRN) is a citywide coalition of community-based development organizations. Founded in 1977 by community groups seeking to pool expertise and share information, the coalition membership consists of over 40 housing organizations representing over 60 city neighborhoods. Over the years CRN's members have created tens of thousands of affordable housing units and made a visible impact on some of Chicago's most disinvested communities, while preserving affordable housing in some of its most rapidly gentrifying ones. Visit www.chicagorehab.org for more information.