BUDGET CUTS PUT A BIG HOLE IN HOUSING AUTHORITY SECURITY
By Rich Lord, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, January 26, 2015

McKeesport resident William Doyle was fatally shot last week in the Crawford Village public housing complex that once benefited from a federally funded police presence but now relies largely on security cameras to deter crime. Doyle, 24, who faced drug charges, didn’t live in Crawford Village, said McKeesport Housing Authority executive director Stephen L. Bucklew. Nor did the men suspected of shooting him. So why were they all there? “The criminals prey on the poor people,” Mr. Bucklew said.

Housing authorities are charged with sheltering low-income families, disabled people and seniors. Since 2001, Congress and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which funds the authorities, have nearly shut the spigot of funding for security in public housing communities.

McKeesport’s authority, for instance, got as much as $600,000 in annual Public Housing Drug Elimination Program grants during the 1990s, and used them to pay that city’s police force for extra patrols. Now those grants are gone, and the authority struggles to come up with $10,000 every few years to pay for occasional impact patrols.

“There are reasons why public housing has more problems with crime than other places,” said Susan J. Popkin, director of The Urban Institute’s Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development. The complexes are “not very secure. They’re very public. Anyone can get in there. … They have all of the ills that come with concentrated poverty. They tend to have a lot of kids.”

The Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh spends more than $2 million a year for private security guards. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on Sunday detailed problems with the deployment of those guards.

As recently as 2001, the Allegheny County Housing Authority got $859,000 in federal grants to fight drug dealing. Those grants were eliminated by President George W. Bush’s administration. Now the county authority has to carve out $901,000 for its own 10-man police force from an operating subsidy of $10.8 million, which is meant to pay for management of 3,300 apartments.

HUD’s only remaining contribution to public housing security comes in the form of Emergency Safety and Security Grants, which typically total around $3 million a year nationally, and never exceed $250,000 for a single authority. They can be spent primarily on equipment — usually surveillance cameras — and never on manpower.

The McKeesport authority recently got one of those grants, and a few months ago finished installing around 30 new cameras, plus expensive buried cables at Crawford Village. Doyle’s shooting, though, occurred in an area not covered by the new, high-resolution cameras.
Complicating matters further, HUD in late 2013 barred authorities from spending capital dollars on security personnel. As a result, said Ms. Popkin, security costs come out of the operating subsidy, “and Congress has been cutting that steadily.”

The Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, which once had a 12-officer police force, cut it down and then in 2011 eliminated it completely, said Mary Boler, the authority’s managing director. The authority still spends around $1.5 million a year with security firm Securitas, which mans front desks, patrols communities and monitors the security camera system.

Others have maintained large security budgets. The Chicago Housing Authority spends $20.7 million a year on private security, plus $2 million on its surveillance camera system, and pays $6 million annually to the city’s police department for guaranteed police patrols.

Why spend anything on security, when it’s neither required nor federally funded? “We’re in various municipalities that are distressed,” with limited police forces, said Frank Aggazio, executive director of the Allegheny County Housing Authority. The authority’s internal police force is part of “a strategy of providing a safe, comfortable living environment.” If residents “feel uncomfortable, they leave,” said Chief Mike Vogel of the county housing authority force. “We’d probably have a 30 percent vacancy rate if we didn’t have police.”

Housing authorities are paid by HUD according to the number of occupied units they manage, and that subsidy barely covers maintenance and administrative costs. If authorities lose residents due to a perceived safety problem, then even less money will flow from Washington.

The county authority police work closely with municipal and county officers and the district attorney, concentrating on high-impact patrols and investigations, said Chief Vogel. “We do a lot of drug roundups over the years where we put informants in, we’ll come in six months later and round up 30 drug dealers,” he said.

Congressionally mandated HUD budget cuts threaten to make things worse, said county authority chief financial officer Rich Stephenson. “They’re compounding the security problem,” he said. “HUD needs to give us dedicated money for security.”