

Va. Ghetto Reels From Funds Cut

By Joseph D. Whitaker Washington Post Staff Writer
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For the 19 years Corine Taylor has lived in Fairfax County's poor black community of Gum Springs, her home has been a three-room shanty with an outdoor toilet behind it and a muddy street in front. She makes daily trips to a nearby fire hydrant for pails of water to wash clothing, to bathe and to cook.

The tiny rooms of her tarpapered shack, at the end of Brosar Road, are congested with the ruins of old furnishings—in one place a sofa without legs, elsewhere a smoky, coal-burning stove. The air inside is filled with the stale odor of burning coal and cooking fat. The sagging wooden floors are smudged with ground-in coal dust and dried mud.

For the past few years, Mrs. Taylor, 58, has been clinging to the hope she would soon be able to move into a new, modern house to be constructed with federal funds under plans developed by the Gum Springs antipoverty agency.

But in February, those hopes were dashed. President Nixon placed a freeze on the low-income housing programs that would have funded the construction of



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By Ken Fell—The Washington Post
Louise Garrett is happy with the new home she has lived in since December.

Fairfax County Ghetto Reels from U.S. Funds Cut

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51 new homes in Brosar Park. He has also announced the dismantling of the Office of Economic Opportunity, the federal agency that funds the Gum Springs antipoverty effort.

At stake is \$75,000 in federal antipoverty funds. That sum will not build the 51 houses, but it will pay for the staff necessary to plan for the homes, organize the people, and, perhaps most important, unravel the federal red tape and applications that result in mortgage subsidies and low-interest loans that will get the 51 houses built.

With the help of federal funds, Gum Springs antipoverty workers had already overseen the building of 28 new homes, called Gabriel Plaza, to replace a dozen wooden hovels. They are now trying somehow to keep alive their battle against substandard living conditions, a battle that one antipoverty official sees as one of the most successful in the nation.

"Nowhere else is there an impoverished cul-de-sac such as Gum Springs surrounded by affluence and splendor," says the official, Jeanus B. Parks, executive director of the United Planning Organization, the regional office that transmits OEO funds to 13 community action programs in the Washington area.

"And nowhere else has the struggle of poor people taken them from crumbling shanties to homes like those in Gabriel Plaza . . . Gum Springs is a classic example of what can be achieved in community antipoverty projects.

"Leaders of the project have spent their time working and organizing instead of being involved in squabbles like some other communities," Parks said. "Now they have something tangible to show for their hard work."

In 1966, Gum Springs became the first impoverished community in the country to receive antipoverty funds. The project had its headquarters at the Saunders B. Moon Center and was to serve all needy areas in Fairfax County.

But while administrators of the program complained that the project focused too greatly on the problems of Gum Springs and should be transplanted to a more neutral area of the county.

Gum Springs residents called for the ouster of the program's white director and insisted that the project remain in Gum Springs.

A new office, the Fairfax Community Action Program, eventually was set up in Fairfax City to coordinate all antipoverty activities in Fairfax County. But since the Gum Springs office already had a contract with the federal government, it became an autonomous agency—the Saunders B. Moon Community Action Association—run largely by residents of Gum Springs.

For the 2,500 residents of Gum Springs, the government's war on poverty provided the first opportunity for fighting the living conditions—hovel homes, muddy roads, lack of sidewalks—that had existed since their ancestors were freed from slavery nearly 200 years ago.

Gum Springs, a 223-acre community located six miles south of Alexandria on Rte. 1, is sandwiched between the middle-class Sherwood Hall subdivision and the Hybla Valley Shopping Center, two developments which emerged in the early 1960s when 80 per cent of the housing in Gum Springs was substandard.

In the ensuing eight years, the anti-poverty effort has begun to transform Gum Springs into a thriving community where residents can find limited amounts of new, low-cost homes and work opportunities. However, about 50 per cent of the houses remain substandard.

Specifically, what the Moon community center needs now is people to continue the work done by the paid anti-poverty workers, who organized the people to create Gabriel Plaza, did the necessary paperwork for federal funding and worked with local officials to bring more services to Gum Springs.

"The money may give out, but we're not going to give up this program," said Calvin Ferguson, 46, who quit a job as a motel bellhop to become executive director of the Gum Springs project two years ago. He was born and reared in a Gum Springs shack.

"We may have to volunteer our time to keep things going, but we've come too far to be turned back. Too

many people depend on us for the program to just disappear."

Ferguson originally planned to submit a \$96,000 budget request to OEO to cover seven staff salaries, travel, supplies, and utilities in the year beginning July 1. After learning of the OEO cuts, Ferguson asked the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors for a \$75,000 grant to fund the Gum Springs program at the same level it is now being run. The supervisors have not yet adopted a 1973-74 budget.

The supervisors, who have spent nearly \$400,000 since 1969 to improve life in Gum Springs, have been criticized

in recent months by residents of other low-income areas for giving too much assistance to Gum Springs.

Herbert E. Harris III, supervisor from the Mt. Vernon district where Gum Springs is located, has championed the cause of the community with the philosophy that Gum Springs needs more assistance because it "has been neglected longer than any other community."

Says Harris: "I plan to do all I can to help get the money Gum Springs needs to continue the community action project. This is no time for us to walk away from this program. I think

we've had some real success here."

Since 1965, the successes at Gum Springs include:

- The bulldozing over of the dozen shanties and their replacement with Gabriel Plaza. A number of narrow muddy streets have also been widened and paved to serve these new houses.

- For the first time, some streets have sidewalks, curbs, gutters and storm drainage systems.

- Gum Springs has a community park and the only public swimming pool built and operated by the county.

- The county purchased Drew Smith School from the school system and converted

it into a community center, which now houses a day care program and some recreation facilities.

- A \$21 million, 250-bed hospital and public health complex are to be completed by mid-1975 adjacent to Gum Springs. Community leaders in Gum Springs asked that the new hospital (which will serve all of southeastern Fairfax) be located in their community to provide service for residents who now must travel nearly 30 miles to the main Fairfax Hospital.

While the people of Gum Springs have been accomplishing all this, says Parks, the United Planning Organi-

zation director, leaders at other programs across the country are still in the process of determining what their communities' problems are and "who the enemy is."

"I think the main difference between Gum Springs and other disadvantaged communities in the area is the ability of the community leaders to spot the various needs of the community, find a possible source of funding and then scramble to submit an acceptable application for the funds before anybody else," said Helen Daniel, a UPO program developer who works with Northern Virginia community action programs.

Community residents, fearing that no funds will be granted by local or federal sources, are planning to volunteer their own time and to hold fundraisers to maintain their planning and organizing efforts.

A group of 25 men—mostly Vietnam veterans—say they will volunteer time to help the Moon center continue providing such services as transporting sick and elderly persons to Fairfax Hospital.

"We're determined we're not going to let the Moon center close down just because they can't get federal funds," said George Jones,

27, a member of the group, called "21 Limited."

Another member, Cill L. Napper, said blacks now have more pride in the community. "Ten years ago a black man could not look forward to living in anything but a rundown shack," Napper said. "Now we have the new homes in Gabriel Plaza. That is proof to blacks in this community that they can get something better."

According to Kay E. Holland, the Moon center's housing specialist, the 51 Brosar Park houses could still be built under Section 221 of the National Housing Act. That program provides low-interest loans for the purchase of homes costing between \$21,000 and \$24,000.