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By **Rex Santus**

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City leaders celebrated a group yesterday that they say has spent the past decade improving public housing, combating crime and cultivating growth in neighborhoods across Columbus.

Mayor Michael B. Coleman, Deputy Chief of Police Jeffrey Blackwell and others honored Community Properties of Ohio's 10th anniversary with a luncheon and bus tours of the seven neighborhoods the group works in.

Most of the organization's 250 properties have been refurbished as subsidized housing for low-income and disabled residents in Weinland Park, the Near East Side, the South Side, Harrison West, Franklinton, Italian Village and Linden.

In addition to low-cost housing, Community Properties officials say they provide outreach programs and hands-on assistance to tenants. Across Ohio, the company manages more than 2,000 units.

Community Properties is an affiliate of the Ohio Capital Corporation of Housing, which bought the Columbus units in 2003.

The collection of 1,335 apartments it acquired was the largest portfolio of Section 8 housing in the nation. More than 500 apartments are in the Weinland Park neighborhood near Ohio State University. Hal Keller, president of Ohio Capital Corp., said arrests have decreased by 80 percent in areas where the company manages housing.

"We put \$70,000 per unit into rehabilitation," Keller said of the 1,000 apartments renovated so far citywide. Some would have "no showers or air-conditioning, so we essentially gutted the units and made them like new." In all, the company says it has spent \$133 million to upgrade and maintain the properties.

Joyce Hughes, president of the Weinland Park Civic Association, said improvements to her neighborhood have attracted many new residents.

"A person who would come into my neighborhood not knowing any of the history would say, 'Oh, what a nice place to be,' " Hughes said.

But for those who do know the history, the housing proved a lifeline.

"In 2006, I was a working mother, pregnant and practically homeless," said Jessica Leftwich, 48, a former Community Properties resident of Weinland Park. "That's when I found the CPO housing program."

She lived in subsidized housing for seven years, but has since turned in her keys. She credits the group for her success.



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Chad Ketler of Community Properties of Ohio emcees a bus tour of the group's properties. Sitting at right are Hal Keller of the Ohio Capital Corp. and Sharon Griffin, CFO of Community Properties.