

HOUSING WITH HEART

PATRICIA L. KIRK



PHOTO COURTESY OF COMMONHOOD COMMUNITIES

In today's affordable housing environment, it is not enough to simply put a roof over people's heads.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPERS are now expected to provide social services to compete for tax credits and other forms of financing, but most would do this anyway just for the benefits provided, mitigating neighborhood opposition, limiting upkeep, improving people's lives, and generating satisfaction and goodwill among residents and the community.

"We started this when the state structured tax programs around special services, but then realized the benefits for tenants and our own interests," admits Percy Vaz, president of AMCAL, a Los Angeles developer of affordable family and seniors' projects, suggesting after-school programs channel youth energy into positive activities, saving wear and tear on properties. "Even if the state changed the tax credit structure, we would continue to do this."

The impact of these programs on the public good is evidenced by the significant number of affordable housing residents who eventually become homeowners, but also in savings in tax dollars, suggests Ray Harper, president of KDF Communities, a California-based affordable housing developer with properties statewide. A study conducted by KDF to determine the economic impact of More Than Roof and Walls, the firm's nonprofit services component, estimated that for every dollar spent, the community avoids \$1.54 in public costs associated with juvenile delinquency.

"All of our projects have a nonprofit partner that provides services required under the financing structure," he says, "but we do this intentionally as part of our mission to create a stable platform in the home, improve quality of life, and increase the level of economic stability, so people become self-sufficient overtime."

In fact, the social services component is now so integral to affordable housing goals that many developers have expanded their missions to encompass both housing and services.

Paul Fate, president and chief executive officer at CommonBond Communities, Minnesota's largest non-

profit affordable housing provider, suggests that one just does not happen anymore without the other. "Our mission is to provide homes that give people with lower incomes a safe and hopeful place to raise a family or live out their years as independently as possible," he says. "We build community by creating affordable housing as a stepping stone to success; resident services are integral to everything we do."

"We started out as a housing provider, but evolved into a self-sufficiency program where housing is only one component," says Steve Cramer, president and executive director of Project for Pride in Living (PPL), a Minnesota-based private nonprofit development corporation that develops both affordable for-sale and rental housing. "The first 15 years were about housing, but then it became part of an entire program that takes a broader approach using housing as a platform to give people a brighter future."

Likewise, Mary Jo Goelzer, chief operating officer of Jamboree Housing Corporation, a nonprofit company based in Orange County, California, that develops, acquires, renovates, and manages affordable housing projects, says, "We've moved from bricks and mortar to overall community development. We're creating an opportunity for low-income families to access housing and services that improve their quality of life."

Some affordable housing developers contract with third-party providers to furnish all on-site resident services. Others have established in-house 501 (3c) nonprofit entities to provide most resident services and programs, but leverage community resources to offer exemplary children's programs and services for special-needs populations.

AMCAL contracts with third-party providers to provide all on-site resident services and programs, such as EngAGE (formerly More Than Just Shelter for Seniors), a southern California nonprofit group well known for its innovative, life-enhancing seniors' programs, and Lifesteps, a statewide nonprofit organization that pro-

**Shingle Creek Commons,
a CommonBond community
for seniors in Minneapolis,
Minnesota.**

Meta Housing's Cortina D'Arroyo community in Arroyo Grande brought housing affordability and the wide array of seniors' programs offered by EngAGE (formerly More Than Shelter for Seniors) to the elderly in the central coastal region of California.

vides family services. The firm, however, contracts with neighborhood service providers when possible. China Town Service Center, for example, provides on-site resident services at AMCAL's new Castellar family apartment project near downtown Los Angeles, and residents can access additional services at the organization's facility, which is just a block away.

Jamboree, on the other hand, established Housing with HEART (Helping Educate, Activate, and Respond Together), an in-house nonprofit division, to provide routine resident services, but partners with community organizations to provide services to special-needs populations. Cyndy Cook, manager of Oregon-based Housing Works, the largest provider of affordable housing east of the Cascade Mountains, points out that these projects are the most financially challenging to do. "They're expensive, and there's not much money in them, so the private sector isn't interested," she says, noting that her organization partnered with the Deschutes County Mental Health Department and St. Charles Medical Center to develop projects for chronically mentally ill and developmentally disabled residents. "[This is] about giving people dignity. This is a labor of love, and it takes the best talents in the community, between housing and services, to really have it."

Jamboree recently broke ground on Diamond Apartment Homes, a 25-unit complex of one- and two-bedroom, fully furnished apartments for formerly homeless individuals with mental illness disorders and their families. The project is being developed in partnership with H.O.M.E.S., an Orange County, California, nonprofit organization that develops housing for people with psychiatric disorders that encourages self-reliance and independence, and works with county mental health agencies to ensure that residents receive appropriate services.

PPL, which operates its own Shelter + Care program to serve family projects, also partners with community organizations on projects for residents with mental illness and substance abuse diagnoses. "Ours is not a therapeutic model; it's based on building relationships," Cramer says, explaining Shelter + Care's mission is to build trusting relationships with residents to fill the role of extended family, and become a trusted adviser and a source of support.

Affordable housing developers also leverage community resources to bring successful children's programs to their communities. Housing Works, for example, has on-site Boys & Girls Clubs. City Towers—a 231-unit U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) project in Oakland owned and managed by KDF—has an on-site Head Start program that serves about 60 preschoolers. KDF donated the 5,000-square-foot (465-sq-m) space and \$750,000 to build out the facility and provide a playground when the Oakland Army Base, where the program was formerly located, closed.

Minnesota-based Commonbond Communities, the largest affordable housing provider in the state with 4,200 units, formed Advantage Services to provide routine resident services at family and seniors' projects, but also partners with the appropriate community organizations to build projects for special-needs populations.

The firm, which owns and operates housing for people with AIDS/HIV and mental illness diagnoses, recently completed a project designed specifically for people living with multiple sclerosis (MS). Kingsley Commons, a 25-unit joint project undertaken with the Minnesota Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and Powderhorn Community Council, offers one- and two-bedroom units for couples and families. The project features universal design, a standard of functional design alternations to accommodate the health status of occupants as they age, adapted to accommodate the mobility limitations of people who use wheelchairs or scooters.

In the case of special-needs populations, physical attributes and facility amenities work hand in hand



PHOTO COURTESY OF META HOUSING



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMBOREE HOUSING CORPORATION



PHOTO COURTESY OF META HOUSING



PHOTO COURTESY OF KDF COMMUNITIES



with services to meet residents' needs, suggests project architect Kent Simon of Minneapolis-based Miller Hanson Partners, who specializes in designing housing for handicapped people. The goal in designing housing and services for special-needs populations is to allow people with disabilities to live independently, he notes. Design must consider the physical limitations and lifestyle needs of the population served.

For example, Simon says that people with mental diagnoses often need encouragement to socialize. They also tend to smoke and drink a lot of coffee, so community spaces should address these lifestyle needs. For example, the project might include a community center with an outdoor terrace for smoking, with a coffee bar and furnishings that encourage interaction and/or a greenway that doubles as a recreational amenity and smoking area.

In designing Kingsley Commons, Simon added six inches (15 cm) to the standard three-foot (0.9-m) universal design standard for doorways to allow a wheelchair or scooter to pass. Bedrooms are wider too, providing ample room between the foot of a bed and dresser for a wheelchair to pass through. The area under the kitchen sink and stovetop was left open, rather than installing cabinets, so a wheelchair can fit underneath. Units also have a bay window instead of a patio or balcony, because it is difficult for wheelchairs to cross a patio door sill, Simon points out. Mobility considerations also are reflected in details in community spaces; for example, outdoor patio tables are just the right height to fit a wheelchair underneath.

Regardless of the type of population housed, project facilities and amenities should be planned in conjunc-

tion with service programming, because resident service coordinators need appropriate spaces in which to provide services.

Community facilities typically have a computer lab and meeting rooms to provide children after-school tutoring and homework help. These areas usually offer adult programs as well, including English as a Second Language (ESL), job search skills, and credit improvement classes, as well as access to online applications for government programs. Projects also provide recreational facilities aimed at engaging youngsters, such as a playground, swimming pool, baseball field, and basketball court, and places for family get-togethers, including a community center with a kitchen for hosting parties with outdoor barbecue grills and picnic tables.

Goelzer says Jamboree customizes common areas to meet demands of the intended resident population. For instance, the smaller kitchen designed as a staging area for dinners at a family community is replaced with a larger demonstration kitchen at a special-needs project that offers cooking classes as part of a program that teaches residents life skills.

Although KDF's seniors' communities do not provide meals, community centers include a full commercial kitchen to provide flexibility to offer this service later on, as people age in place, explains Harper. Women at one seniors' project are already putting this equipment to good use, he notes, getting together regularly to prepare food for the homeless.

Seniors' programs typically involve lifelong learning or lifestyle-enhancing opportunities, such as art, com-

Montecito Vista, an affordable family housing project in Irvine, California, by Jamboree Housing Corporation, is adjacent to a new community park (left). Children in the after-school program (bottom right) have received help with homework, tutoring, and access to the community's computer facility. Many residents at Burbank Senior Artists Colony in Burbank, California, are attracted to the project's top-flight arts and media facilities (top right). City Towers, a 231-unit HUD project in Oakland owned and managed by KDF Communities, has an on-site Head Start program that serves about 60 preschoolers (bottom left).



META HOUSING

Jasmine at Founder's Village in Fountain Valley, California, an award-winning community by Meta Housing and Greystone Homes, Inc., offers on-site educational classes, cultural and intergenerational opportunities, health and wellness programs, and recreational activities.

munications, computer, exercise, and wellness classes; trips to cultural events, like theatrical productions or the symphony; and intergenerational community building, such as mentoring or tutoring children in schools located in low-income neighborhoods.

A growing trend in seniors' projects is designing facilities around niche interests. A classic example is the Burbank Senior Artists Colony by **Meta Housing Corporation**, a southern California developer of affordable and market-rate seniors' and family housing. The award-winning seniors' apartment community, which is home to a number of retirees from the entertainment industry, provides creative facilities attractive to aging artists who want to continue pursuing their life's work and others interested in exploring their creative potential for the first time.

Facilities include filmmaking and editing equipment, an indoor and outdoor theater for staging theatrical productions and music programs, a sculpture garden, an artist studio and gallery, a darkroom, a library, classrooms, a fitness center, a swimming pool, a clubroom with overstuffed furniture and baby grand piano, and a serving kitchen.

John Huskey, Meta Housing president and chief executive officer, envisions future communities for seniors built on interests—possibly conversational French or travel—that tie residents together.

Meta Housing also contracts with EngAGE, which takes a whole-person approach to designing programs that engage active older adults. "We do something creative everywhere—art, creative writing, computer courses, and intergenerational programs," says Tim

Carpenter, EngAGE executive director, noting the biggest difference between programs involves facilities provided.

"We do senior Olympics, produce a radio show and plays, make films, and offer classes. *Experience Talks*, EngAGE's successful weekly radio show on KPFFK public radio, has involved 2,200 seniors so far and has 250,000 listeners statewide," Carpenter says.

"Our classes operate on a semester schedule and are progressive like college courses. They aren't about busy work: we want to deliver something where once the teacher leaves, people practice what they learn," he says. Carpenter notes that these classes have produced some startling results, like a resident in her 60s who took a creative writing class and wrote a screenplay that is being made into a movie that will be profiled this fall on HBO.

Another trend is the integration of affordable housing into urban market-rate projects. Meta Housing is integrating affordable units with market-rate housing in urban infill locations, rather than segregating low-income families and seniors. For example, 30 percent of the Burbank Senior Artists Colony units were set aside for low-income seniors, and 20 percent of units at the new Northwest Gateway Apartments near downtown Los Angeles were earmarked for families making a maximum of 50 percent of the area's median income of \$51,315.

In addition, Housing Works has partnered with Kimper County to locate a workforce housing project in an affluent urban neighborhood. Lava Court, a \$9.6 million mixed-use development with 44 rental units, will leverage the sale of 7,800 square feet (725 sq m) of ground-floor retail condominiums to help finance housing units in downtown Bend, Oregon, where an influx of affluent baby boomers has caused housing prices to skyrocket, Cook notes.

PPL also is developing a project that will integrate families with formerly homeless residents who have mental illness diagnoses. Cramer notes there is currently a raging debate around whether services should be brought to the people or people aggregated in one place so services can be provided. "Service professionals can hash it out among themselves," he says. "We do it both ways, 20 to 30 units in a building, as well as scattered throughout [projects]."

So far, affordable housing developers have managed to find funding for their resident services component by including it as a line item in the property's management budget, underwriting it into government management fees, and applying for grants and fundraising.

Rising construction costs, however, are beginning to chisel away at affordable housing developers' ability to



META HOUSING



COMMONBOND COMMUNITIES

provide lifestyle amenities, notes Sean Hyatt, AMCAL vice president of development, noting that his firm is constantly on the lookout for good, inexpensive ideas. “We’re trying to come up with concepts and amenities where we don’t have to capitalize costs,” he says. One interesting low-cost idea borrowed from a Seattle project is raised pea gardens, which offer seniors an opportunity to grow their own gardens without having to get down on their hands and knees to work or pick vegetables.

Affordable housing developers agree that building high-quality housing is essential to integrating affordable projects with market-rate neighborhoods. “People want affordable housing but not near them—they want to put it on the outskirts of town,” Cook explains.

“Society has low expectations for people who rent, but when people are held to a higher standard and treated like customers, they ‘get’ that and respond to it accordingly,” she says, stressing that residents must be held accountable for their actions. “If they tear a screen, they replace it.”

The resident services component is vital to overcoming opposition to new developments, emphasizes Sam Mistrano, director of Jamboree’s resident services division Housing with HEART. These programs provide residents with community- and skills-building activities, so that they can attain greater economic stability and improve their future.

He says that Jamboree has encountered minimal opposition to projects because “we bring something to the community that hasn’t been done before,” and



META HOUSING

notes that residents at Jamboree projects launched a neighborhood beautification program and worked to get the school bus line extended to their community.

“Opposition melts [away] with outreach and education,” Mistrano adds, recalling how engaging community members in project planning converted an avid adversary to a seniors’ project into its biggest supporter who then wanted to put his own grandparents there.

When people agree to put affordable housing in their neighborhood, they want assurances that it will not become blighted when low-income families move in, Cook says.

“They want it done and done well to ensure that low-income housing doesn’t devalue market-rate homes. We have no problem with opposition from community associations, because we build quality housing that can be integrated into nice neighborhoods,” she concludes. “We expect our residents to be a good neighbor or eviction happens.” **MFT**

PATRICIA L. KIRK is a freelance writer based in Texas.

Many residents at Burbank Senior Artists Colony (top left) in Burbank, California, enables residents to continue their life’s work. Valley Square Commons (top right) is a CommonBond family community in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jasmine at Founder’s Village (bottom right) in Fountain Valley, California, is an award-winning community by Meta Housing and Greystone Homes, Inc.