

September 19, 2005 **Universally Designed Apartments Debut in Berkeley Units designed for people with disabilities at lower-income prices are well received by city**

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Cynthia Daniels, a woman suffering from lupus who has been both homeless and poor, said she and her 19-year-old son walked out of their bedrooms in their new home one night recently, looked at each other, hugged, then both started to cry uncontrollably.

"I've never had a dishwasher and some of the amenities I have here," Daniels said as tears poured from her eyes. "This is just a miracle."

The two are among the 27 families living in the first universal-design, low-income apartment complex in the nation, recently opened in Berkeley.

Affordable Housing Associates, a nonprofit company in partnership with another nonprofit, **Hearth Homes Community Building**, developed University Neighborhood Apartments on University Avenue.

The project, which hopes to spur similar developments, aims to make new housing available to a cross-section of residents who aren't target demographics for traditional, market-rate units. The community features housing units that are accessible by as many people as possible, regardless of age, ability and financial situation, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

The nonprofits designed each unit and all common areas to be fully accessible for everyone in order to create an integrated community. Although all the units are built with the same specifications, only 14 are reserved for tenants with disabilities.

"This is a logical way to build in the 21st century," said Sue Siegel, founder and president of Hearth Homes Community Building. "I think this is the way everything should be built."

Universal-design principles call for accommodations, such as extra floor space, wide doorways, lower kitchen counters, cabinets and keyholes, push-pull lever faucets for those with limited hand strength, stoves with buttons on the front, pull-out cutting boards and roll-in showers with grab bars.

Often, these types of design adaptations are a token addition in apartment complexes or are built in out-of-the-way facilities.

"The idea was not to segregate disabled tenants to a small corner in the complex," said Susan Friedland, Affordable Housing Associates' executive director. "We wanted to develop a community where anybody can use any apartment unit. Friends can move around and visit without limitations."

"University Neighborhood Apartments creates an integrated community for people of all abilities through 'design-for-all' facilities. Those with physical and developmental disabilities can make one home with their loved ones," she said.

In demographic studies, people with disabilities rate high in unemployment and low in income, some of which is attributed to the psychological ramifications of isolation.

"Instead of looking down on the disabled," Friedland said, "this is a step toward giving disabled people an opportunity to work with other people."

The complex has 11 three-bedroom units, 14 two-bedroom units and three one-bedroom units.

Friedland credits Siegel's passion and vision for integrating disabled and nondisabled residents for making University Neighborhood Apartments a reality.

Siegel, who lost her husband from multiple sclerosis, wanted to create a place for

families to live, as opposed to assisted-living centers that can't always accommodate those without disabilities.

"Housing people together helps both groups by ending isolation and creating an inclusive, supportive and caring community," Siegel said.

Some tenants said they felt trapped in their former homes because their mobility was so hindered by the surroundings that they couldn't even visit their neighbors.

One resident, Molly, talked about how she hadn't felt water from a shower hit her skin in 20 years. In her previous homes, she had no option but to use a cup and pail to take a sponge bath.

Siegel said the woman has a roll-in shower and feels a sense of dignity and independence again.

Extra Features' Price

The added cost for the extra features adds only 5 percent to 10 percent to the cost of building the unit, said Kevin Zwick, Affordable Housing Associates director of housing development.

Rents, depending on household income levels, range from \$226 per month to \$1,200 per month.

"This isn't your traditional affordable housing," Friedland said. "These units have high ceilings, granite counters and oak cabinets. People usually think of dull apartments with flat roofs. We went beyond that here."

Toolworks, a nonprofit organization with 25 years of experience working with people with disabilities, provides case management, life skills instruction, assistance with employment and programs to help integrate residents with the community at large.

"Why can't all new housing be accessible to people with disabilities as well as affordable to lower- and middle-income people?" asked Siegel, whose complex was designed by Bay Area architect **Kava Massih**. "Why don't we have more universal design that people can afford?"

The answer might be that building in most parts of the Golden State is not cheap. With housing in such high demand, developers tend to build upscale units to maximize profits. Because the rents on universal-design units are below market rate, they are almost cost-prohibitive to build.

Zwick said it took several years to get eight partners to contribute \$11 million in addition to low-income housing tax credits to build the residential units.

Friedland said Berkeley city officials have shown strong support from the beginning.

"They provided about 25 percent of the funding for this project," Friedland said. "The mayor spoke at the grand opening, and that's special because few cities support plans for affordable housing."

The issue of universal design has been weighed by the Legislature several times in recent years, including proposals to mandate that as many as 10 percent of all new homes be built using the principles of universal design.

More recently in 2002, Assembly Bill 2787 was passed requiring the state to develop guidelines and a model ordinance for new construction and home modifications consistent with the principles of universal design.

And, in 2003, Assembly Bill 1400 passed, requiring developers of housing for the disabled to provide a list of accessible features in new housing developments or face a fine.

Despite efforts to mandate affordable, accessible housing, Friedland and Siegel's support of the project wasn't because they were forced to have a certain amount of affordable and low-income housing.

"This was our calling," Siegel said.

"It's our mission to bring affordable housing to meet unmet needs, and to me it makes

so much sense," Friedland said. "Our bottom line is servicing the community's needs. I feel very strongly about that."

Community Concerns

Friedland admitted that some neighbors of the apartment complex had concerns, but those issues were unrelated to the idea of low-cost housing moving into the area.

"The residents were concerned most about the density of the project and how the building would interface with the two- and three-bedroom homes in the area," Friedland said. "That's what concerned them most."

City officials and the two firms held several meetings in an effort to hear residents' concerns and work out a solution that would make everyone happy.

Police officials in Berkeley said so far there's been no increase in crime in the area as a result of the low-income housing in the area.

"What we ended up with pleased just about everyone," Friedland said. "We have a building that looks like a collection of different smaller buildings and not one monolithic monster, something residents said they didn't want. We heard them."

Friedland said it took a lot of work obtaining the final approval and assistance to do the project.

"It's not easy," Friedland said. "It's much more complicated, there's more paperwork, more accountability, and there's a lot of red tape involved with the funding. This isn't that easy to finance."

Affordable Housing Associates has other East Bay projects in the planning stages, though none thus far have a universal theme.

"We hope University Neighborhood Apartments is an example of what future building could be," Friedland said.

University Neighborhood Apartments joins other notable Bay Area universal-design projects under development, including the Ed Roberts Campus at the Ashby BART station, being designed by **Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects** - *E-mail*

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