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COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS

Heritage Park

Better care for low-income seniors

By Jay Walljasper



Heritage Park, a state-of-the-art senior living center in North Minneapolis, gathers under one roof the services needed most by older people. The handsome new building, which might easily be mistaken for a boutique hotel, features a cozy verandah looking out on a park with a pond.

Walking through the front doors, seniors encounter an information desk staffed by friendly faces ready to help direct them to a YMCA specially designed for older users, a rehabilitation therapy center, a medical clinic, an adult day services facility, a comfortable lounge with a fireplace, and the offices of the Minneapolis Highrise Representatives Council. Just down the hall (one leg of an 1/8-mile circular indoor walking course) is Feeney Manor, an innovative 48-unit memory care and enhanced assisted living facility. Across the lane is Heritage Commons, a 102-unit assisted living residence.

A clean, cheerful place filled with natural light and stylish furnishings, Heritage Park would make any of us feel less anxious about what life will be like as an older person. Our only concern might be how we could afford to live in such a nice place.

Well, actually, Feeney Manor and Heritage Commons are Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) residences for low-income seniors. MPHA also runs the Heritage Park Senior Services Center, open to all seniors but especially convenient to those living on the North Side.

“With increasing numbers of older residents in public housing, we realized that many could stay as they aged if they could get daily services,” notes Evelyn LaRue, director, Heritage Park Senior Services Campus.

“Heritage Park responds to the needs of an overlooked constituency—and that has a big impact on a low-income community,” explains Ron Price, senior program officer at the Twin Cities Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), which helped in financing part of the \$16 million project.

“MPHA has done a spectacular job of overseeing the creation process—from designing



Heritage Park Senior Services Center, North Minneapolis

the facility and getting it built to bringing the right partners to the table,” says Price. With little expertise in advanced senior care, MPHA contracts with the YMCA for the fitness center, Courage Center for rehabilitation services, Neighborhood HealthSource for the medical clinic, and Augustana Care Corporation for memory care, adult day services and enhanced assisted living—a higher level of care than typical assisted living.

Feeney Manor is the first public housing facility in the country offering memory care and enhanced assisted living, according to Katie Stadther, program manager. Since Feeney Manor opened in February, housing officials from Los Angeles, Colorado, Phoenix, Atlanta, and Michigan have all come to visit.

Cora McCorvey, MPHA’s executive director and CEO, long recognized the need to offer dignified care for seniors experiencing memory loss, who sometimes become a threat to themselves or other public housing residents. “I would visit a building and find seniors walking in a daze,” she remembers. “They needed some intervention.”

But the housing authority couldn't remove them without permission from families or the courts—and by the time that happened many residents were often sent straight to nursing homes or psychiatric wards.

When Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009, MPHA saw the idea of Heritage Park Senior Services Campus as the kind of shovel-ready project that could help boost the economy while providing a valuable social service. Stimulus dollars provided nearly 2/3 of the cost and a LISC affiliate, the New Markets Support Company, helped close the funding gap by making a \$3.8 million New Markets Tax Credit investment in the services center.



Interior of a living space in Heritage Park

In a time of fiscal constraints, some critics might charge that it’s extravagant for the public to provide this quality of services to those with low incomes.

“Part of the calculus is that these kinds of services allow seniors greater independence, keeping them out of more costly facilities,” says Twin Cities LISC’s deputy director, Erik Takeshita. “Co-locating services like this also saves money on transportation.” An emphasis on exercise, rehabilitation, adult day services and assisted living care geared to each resident’s abilities reduces the need for nursing homes, which costs taxpayers two to three times as much as Feeney Manor, according to Stadther.

“I’m getting better living here,” Dave Copple, 62, a Feeney Manor resident recovering from a stroke, tells me at lunch in the adult day services center. “It’s not pills that heal me, it’s all the people right here.” Copple tries to walk a mile every day on the fitness course and plays trivia games to keep sharp. He adds, “It’s really nice here. My room is spacious and I go to the Y three or four times a week to work on my legs and back. There are a lot of activities to keep your mind going. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t like it here.”

LISC has invested \$61 million and leveraged additional investments of \$239 million in the North Side of Minneapolis.

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