



How three sectors came together to help their community with a new affordable housing model - by Jennie Schaff

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In an effort to address some of the many issues found at Affordable Housing complexes in our country, as well as to help find homes for those in need of affordable housing in our community, a unique and innovative partnership was formed. Our team at Jewish Family Service of Rochester, New York (JFS) sought out a local affordable apartment community to run a pilot program. With the support and vision of JFS in conjunction with The Konar Foundation, Alliant Strategic Investments, CAPREIT Management, and the HAPI (Healthy Apartment Property Initiatives) Foundation, came together in an effort to provide holistic programming to the residents of The Rochester Highlands—an affordable housing community comprised of 500 units in Rochester, NY.

Modeled after JFS's Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) and incorporating programmatic ideas from other HAPI Foundation locations in Dallas and Southern California, discussion ensued between JFS Rochester, the HAPI Foundation and the owners of the Rochester Highlands. Conversations centered around social determinants of health and what defines community and retention within a community that is notoriously transient. Traditionally, affordable housing unit residents have not reported feeling a connection to the place where they are living nor experiencing a sense of community. There seemed to be more need than ever to help people find affordable housing and help make this connection. These were the impetuses of the challenge of the study. We felt that one year would not be long enough to demonstrate the positive outcomes we anticipated. The team secured a three-year grant funded by The Konar Foundation (a Rochester-based philanthropic foundation). Holistic programming at the Rochester apartment community began in the summer of 2019 and after one full year, we can assuredly say that the impact has been significant.

While there is plenty of unknown about the makeup of residents at affordable housing complexes nationwide, one certainty is this population tends to be extremely transient. Whether that is because of higher incidences of poverty and financial insecurity or whether that is because of reports of little

sense of community in these complexes, the bottom line is that people do not feel connected and their physical and emotional needs are often not being met. Due to the nature of the environments, people living at affordable housing complexes struggle with finances with the majority living below the poverty line. When someone is struggling financially, there are associated issues that often coexist such as: Food insecurity, lack of transportation, job insecurity, mental health issues and higher incidences of depression and anxiety, among others.

As a social service agency, JFS wanted to use a local affordable housing community as a pilot to see what quality of life improvements could be gained from holistic programming. Since several JFS current agency clients were already residing at Rochester Highlands, it seemed an ideal place to offer services and launch this initiative to promote healthy living in the community. JFS was already delivering Kosher food, providing aging case management , and transportation services to synagogue to Jewish clients residing at the complex and therefore JFS was able to build into their grant monies for Jewish Programming.

Holistic programming takes into account mental health, physical health, social determinants of health, and general wellbeing. We, at Jewish Family Service, aim to utilize as many of the services that we currently offer as possible at the complex. Utilization of mental health counseling services, the food pantry, our free clothing “closet” and school supply store, case management for the aging, and our transportation service program would be instrumental in this program. Additionally, we hired two part-time social workers for on-site resource management work, and a part time nurse to serve residents on-site. We also partnered with agencies in the community to offer services and programming at the complex. Aside from these contributions, made possible by The Konar Foundation, and delivered through Jewish Family Service of Rochester, there are the contributions from The HAPI Foundation, The Rochester Highlands, and CAPREIT Management.

The HAPI Foundation, whose mission is to promote health and wellness to residents living in affordable housing communities, has provided the funding for such things like a monthly newsletter to keep residents informed of community events and activities, provided materials for the site’s community garden, and offered exercise and nutrition workshops, pedometers and t-shirts for the walking groups and incentives to help build resident participation.

The owners of the complex, Alliant Strategic Investments, have provided a complete renovation of the clubhouse, including private counseling rooms, marked walking trails, community gardens, outdoor fitness areas, social areas to gather and monies for event gatherings and the cohesiveness of a well-run housing community.

CAPREIT Management is a well experienced provider of management services for over 10,000 affordable housing units across the country and staffs the entire team of on-site personnel at the property.

Through planning and collecting input from stakeholders and individuals in the community familiar with either the asset and the social determinants of health, JFS created and disseminated a survey to residents at The Rochester Highlands. With 112 responses from residents, we collected baseline

data on such things as where the residents see themselves in terms of their physical health including nutrition, food insecurity, chronic disease, finances, depression, anxiety, blood pressure, child care, financial literacy, among others. This survey also included questions assessing what types of programming would interest them.

A council of residents was formed and implemented to help guide the programming delivered at the complex. Although programming evolved during COVID with virtual gatherings, the JFS and Management teams have found the buy in from the residents to be very positive. Residents have shared that they feel an increased sense of community and stated their needs and concerns are being addressed and cared for with the presence of JFS staff and supportive programming on site.

COVID has certainly added a different dimension of challenge to our programs at The Rochester Highlands, but now more than ever as people are unemployed and strapped financially, our work there is really just beginning. Plans are in the works for financial literacy instruction, holiday programming, advocacy work, school age tutoring, outdoor socially distant gatherings on the property, town hall meetings with guest lecturers, nutrition education, walking and gardening clubs. We have a lot of work to do but as one of the residents so adequately put it when he was leaving one of our Shabbat Dinners, "I can't remember the last time I felt like I was home. Maybe it was when I was 11. I am 64. Tonight, this, this makes me feel like I am home."

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