Nonprofit group breaks ground in battle for AIDS housing
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Although Townspeople serves as a referral network for AIDS patients in need of affordable housing, it recognized that a variety of housing options is needed for those in varying stages of their illness.

The diagnosis of the AIDS virus was trying enough, but add to that impoverishment and homelessness, and it was more than Jim Sendrey could bear. Convinced there was no alternative to suicide, Sendrey tried to take his life by jumping off the four-story AIDS Foundation building in Hillcrest. His attempt ultimately failed when he was wrestled to the ground before reaching the building's top floor.

That was two months ago. While Sendrey continues to battle the AIDS virus that infects his body, the prognosis for his housing situation has improved considerably.

Thanks to the nonprofit group Townspeople, Sendrey is now living in a recently refurbished, eight-unit apartment complex dedicated exclusively to low-income individuals suffering from AIDS.

"If I hadn't gotten this place, I'd be dead. I would have killed myself for sure," Sendrey said matter-of-factly, smoking a cigarette while sitting on the steps in the inner courtyard of the complex. "I was in a totally hopeless situation."

Located in City Heights, the Wilson Avenue Apartments complex represents the first permanent housing project in the county serving only people who have AIDS or are infected with the virus. While the county has eight residential shelters that provide communal living for AIDS patients, those are considered a form of transitional housing for people who are either homeless or have reached the final stage of their illness.

"It really is a significant achievement," said David Harris, formerly a housing specialist for the county Office of AIDS Coordination. "Here we are 15 years into the AIDS epidemic and finally, through a combination of local and federal funds, Townspeople has been able to create the first permanent housing project."

Once a blight on the neighborhood, the white, stucco complex is also being touted as a much-needed face lift for a neighborhood clearly in transition.

When developer Jim Rogers purchased the building in anticipation of eventually turning it over to Townspeople, the complex seemed almost unsalvageable.

Floors inside the units were destroyed, trash littered the grounds, windows and doors were broken, ceilings were crumbling and remnants of drug use were not hard to find.

"It was squalor," said Rogers, pointing out the now-polished hardwood floors, new kitchen counter tops and the repaired ceiling in one of the units. "This was probably one of the most decrepit places I'd ever seen. You couldn't walk in here without holding a cloth to your face. Just
about everything you see here is brand new."

**A warm reception**

While City Heights residents often complain about the plethora of social services and low-income housing concentrated in their community, Wilson Avenue Apartments was greeted warmly by the community.

By contrast, the nonprofit group Esperanza Housing and Community Development Corp. has encountered strong community opposition to the 22-unit AIDS apartment complex it is developing in Oceanside.

"Our reaction has been that City Heights already has an appropriate level of social-service projects, but if someone is willing to take the worst situation on the block and make it the best situation on the block, we're receptive," said Michael Sprague, vice chairman of the City Heights planning group. "I don't think most people even know it's housing for AIDS. They just know it looks better."

Although Townspeople serves primarily as a referral network for AIDS patients in need of affordable housing, it recognized that a variety of housing options is needed for those in varying stages of their illness, explained program administrator Patric Stillman.

When Rogers found the City Heights building, Townspeople seized on it because the units are nearly all one bedroom in size, located on the ground floor, and the building is centrally located.

The nonprofit agency is in the process of purchasing the building and expects to close escrow by next month. It is using a combination of federal housing funds, as well as money from the city's Housing Trust Fund, to finance the $257,000 purchase. The City Council gave final approval earlier this month for use of the Housing Trust Fund money.

Once Townspeople takes over, rents at the complex will average between $180 and $240 a month, said Stillman. The average income of the tenants is roughly $8,000 a year, and most of the tenants survive on Social Security and state disability payments that typically are a little more than $600 a month.

**Back from downward spiral**

Before Sendrey was diagnosed with the AIDS virus five years ago, he and his lover were earning together $70,000 a year and owned a large, four-bedroom home in the College Area.

But Sendrey's life took a downward spiral after his lover died five years ago and Sendrey was forced to quit work and sell the house because of his declining health. Thinking he had little time to live, Sendrey donated much of his money to AIDS and gay and lesbian organizations. Before long, he was penniless and living on the streets.

Shortly before moving into the Wilson Avenue Apartments earlier this year, Sendrey was living in an $85-a-week flophouse downtown.

"I filled out an application for this place and thank God, they accepted me," said Sendrey, 47, a former computer operator. "Now, with this place, it's just me, it's something I can afford and I don't have to worry about any roommates moving out."
Blind as a result of AIDS, Diana Welch is convinced that were it not for the Townspeople project, she would now be living in a shelter. Instead, she and her Seeing Eye dog share a two-bedroom apartment, for which she pays $425 a month.

"It's very comfortable here, it's safe and you have moral support," said Welch, 36, who worked as a waitress and bartender in Sinaloa, Mexico, before her illness no longer allowed her to work.

"It doesn't bother me one way or the other if the other residents are HIV-infected, but it does make it more comfortable," she explained, sipping coffee while her dog rested her head on Welch's lap. "If we're feeling like heck or looking like heck, it makes it easier."

The idea of housing AIDS patients in the same complex makes sense logistically and economically, Stillman said. Many of the tenants contract with outside agencies for health and social services, so having the residents all living in one building makes it easier for the providers, as well as the residents, he explained.

"We can also lower the rents by owning the building, plus it also protects the residents' rights from being discriminated against," he added.

The need for affordable housing for those who have AIDS is acute -- and growing, say housing specialists. Countywide, more than 2,600 individuals have AIDS, plus some 15,000 people are infected with the virus but not yet diagnosed with the disease, say county health and AIDS experts.

A survey conducted last year of persons infected with AIDS revealed that 70 percent of the respondents had incomes of $1,000 a month or less. By contrast, housing resources for AIDS patients are very limited.

An existing rental-assistance program that allows persons with AIDS to pay no more than 30 percent of their income toward housing currently serves some 200 people. In addition, there are eight residential AIDS shelters with 73 beds in all, plus three licensed facilities -- with a total of 56 beds -- that provide more intensive care for people whose illness is more severe.

While San Diego initially led the nation in securing rental assistance for people with AIDS, it has fallen behind cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco in providing affordable-housing opportunities for persons with AIDS, said David Harris, now housing director for Episcopal Community Services in San Diego.

"These days, if you ask people if they know someone with AIDS, chances are better than half that they will know someone who has AIDS or has died of it," added Harris. "It's now touched so many lives. So, the city of San Diego, along with the nonprofit organizations, now feel there is a real need to put money into longer-term, permanent housing that will last long after monies in Washington run out."
Caption: 2 PICS
1. A refuge: "If I hadn't gotten this place, I'd be dead," says Jim Sendrey, who has moved into an apartment complex for persons with AIDS or HIV. (H-8) 2. Support group: Norman Hampton (left), a resident at Wilson Avenue Apartments, chats with complex owner Jim Rogers, who rehabbed the building, and fellow tenant Diana Welch. (H-8) 1,2. Union-Tribune photos / EDUARDO CONTERAS
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