

Residents with HIV/AIDS find a home for healing in Minneapolis

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Finding a home can get complicated when you're struggling with HIV/AIDS.

"The only place I could afford was a small studio out in the 'burbs," said Christopher Morris, a 6-foot-9 former college swimmer who no longer has the energy to work in restaurant management. He can't afford a car. Without one, getting to doctors and other medical resources was difficult. "It's very important to get to those appointments," he said.

When an apartment became available at Clare Midtown, a Minneapolis residence for low-income people with HIV/AIDS, Morris jumped at the opportunity. In June, he and Pickles, his elderly rescue spaniel, moved into their new home, which is conveniently located near a light-rail station.

"It's been a godsend," said Morris. "I love it. I've been through a rough road. My prayers definitely have been answered."

His new neighbors have also traveled rough roads. For many, Clare Midtown is a stable home after life on the streets or in and out of shelters, said Chuck Peterson, executive director of Clare Housing, a nonprofit that provides housing and support services for those living with HIV/AIDS and their families. Last year, 64 percent of Clare Housing residents came from a long-term homeless situation.

"This isn't what they expect to see. For some residents, it's overwhelming," said Peterson of the stylish modern building, which looks a lot like other desirable, new apartment complexes in the Twin Cities.

"Affordable housing" conjures up images of dreary, institutional structures, not prizewinning architecture. There's nothing dreary or institutional about Clare Midtown. In fact, it did win a prize: the 2014 Affordable Housing Design Award from AIA Minnesota and the McKnight Foundation, beating out 12 other entries. The awards program, now in its third year, grew out of a McKnight initiative to assess the role of design in creating affordable housing that's good for residents and for the greater community.

"Nobody would drive by and think it's an affordable [housing] building," said architect Todd Rhoades of Cermak Rhoades Architects, St. Paul, which designed the project.



Mary Robinson showed some of her homemade jewelry to Debbie Wyman, Clare Midtown's community outreach coordinator.

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Clare Midtown occupies a high-visibility corner lot in south Minneapolis.

Brandon Stengel, Farm Kid Studios,



"My prayers definitely have been answered," said Christopher Morris, with his dog, Pickles.

A panel of jurors evaluated the local projects on several criteria: responsiveness to the needs of the client population, community connection, long-term asset value and overall design quality.

Jurors commended Clare Midtown for its thoughtful use of site and resources. “The designers took a difficult site and made it a community asset. Money was put where it most mattered,” one juror said.

The project is Clare Housing’s second facility providing low-income housing for people with HIV/AIDS. Its first, Clare Apartments in northeast Minneapolis, also designed by Cermak Rhoades, opened in 2004 and is more traditional in style, Rhoades said.

For Clare Midtown, the team wanted an upbeat modern look. Because of its site, on a corner near the light-rail station, the building is highly visible from all sides. “It doesn’t have a front and a back. It fronts everywhere,” Rhoades said. “It was important to create a building the neighborhood feels proud of.”

Preserving green space also was an important part of the design, both to provide a healing environment for the residents and to present an appealing face to the neighborhood. There’s a perennial garden, walking path and patio, all shaded by a giant cottonwood tree.

“This isn’t an institution,” said Peterson. “It was critical to create an environment that was a home.”

The 45 furnished one-bedroom and studio units are simple yet modern and functional. Residents, who sign a one-year lease, are free to paint and decorate any way they wish, and to bring their pets. “We definitely believe in pet therapy. Pets are a big piece of helping people heal,” Peterson said.

The hallways are bright, thanks to windows at each end that let light filter in and offer views to the outdoors, a visual reminder that residents are part of a larger community, Rhoades said.

Materials needed to be durable, low-maintenance and budget-friendly, he said, “but they can’t look institutional. It’s a fine balance.” The textured rubber floors in the hallways are one example. They’re tough and easy to clean, yet the pattern gives them a stylish, contemporary vibe.

Living by the rules

Clare Midtown may look like other new, market-rate apartment buildings, but there’s a lot going on inside.

One-third of residents are sick enough to require assisted-living services. Some have “behavioral issues,” after years of living on the streets, Peterson said. “They have to be reintegrated — how to live with neighbors, what a lease means.”

Some have criminal backgrounds or addiction issues. Clare doesn’t accept sex offenders, but it does accept those who are chemically dependent. “We don’t require sobriety, but we do have rules. You can’t use on-site,” Peterson said. Beyond that, “we try to work with folks. We don’t want them back on the streets. We believe everybody deserves the right to a home.”

And while there’s a waiting list of about 200 people to get in, not all residents are happy campers all of the time.

Mary Robinson, a resident for 10 months, would rather be living with her fiancé. Clare Midtown has “too many rules,” she said, such as limiting overnight guests. She’d like her 18-year-old daughter to be able to stay with her more often. “I’m trying to get her on my lease.” The walls in Robinson’s studio are plastered with photos of her three children and drawings by one of her sons, along with her collection of hats and sunglasses.

But her health has improved significantly during her time at Clare Midtown. When she moved in, at the urging of her case manager, Robinson was gaunt and ill. She’s regained weight, to the point that she jokes about fitting into her clothes, and her

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Clare Midtown was designed to present an appealing face to the neighborhood.

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health is much improved.

She was looking forward to her birthday, which she planned to celebrate with barbecue ribs and a bus trip to Mystic Lake Casino. Eventually, the former cook would like to start baking and selling homemade pies in the neighborhood. In the meantime, she enjoys “game night,” a monthly event when a church group visits, bringing snacks, bingo cards and prizes. She also likes hanging out at the front desk, “picking on the nurses and messing with Booboo,” a staff member’s dog.

For some residents, Clare Midtown is a “steppingstone” to improved health and another, more permanent, home. But “there’s no limit to how long they can stay,” Peterson said. A handful of residents have been there since the building opened in 2011. And for some, Clare Midtown is the end of the line.

“The most touching thing was, the day we received the [design] award, a resident died that day,” Peterson said. “We had tried to get him into a nursing home, but he said, ‘No. Clare Midtown is my home.’ He was able to be here until his final day.”

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