

Innovation and Inclusivity Driving New Housing Initiative in Howard County

The lack of affordable, supportive housing for adults with autism and other disabilities is reaching a crisis level across the country. It's a particular challenge in Howard County and throughout the Baltimore area, where demand is escalating, housing prices are growing and supply is insufficient to demand.

The parent of a 21-year-old son, Trey, with autism, Theresa Ballinger knows the challenges involved with housing individuals with disabilities like her son firsthand. "It's a struggle," said Ballinger, who serves as president of the Howard County Autism Society (HCAS). "The long-term, affordable housing Trey and his peers need simply isn't available."

Ballinger and others expect the problem to escalate as more than 500 young adults with various types of disabilities will transition out of Howard County schools in the next five years. Meanwhile, the population of adults in Howard County over the age of 65 is expected to double over the next 20 years. And affordable housing for working families is in increasingly short supply.

An Answer

In response, HCAS and an alliance of partners have come up with an innovative solution that's bigger than autism, or even disability, for that matter. It's focused on community — specifically, a diverse, mixed-income community that will serve not only adults with autism and other disabilities, but older adults and families as well. Another innovative twist: Neighbors will keep an eye out for one another.

The project will adapt an award-winning intergenerational housing model being used across the nation to support populations facing specific challenges. In communities based on the model, older adults live alongside younger generations, and residents make a commitment to being supportive neighbors. The model is in use in communities like Bridge Meadows, in Portland, Ore., where it supports families involved with foster care; and Bastion, in New Orleans, whose residents include military veterans with life-long rehabilitative needs.

The Howard County initiative would be among the first in the country to adapt the

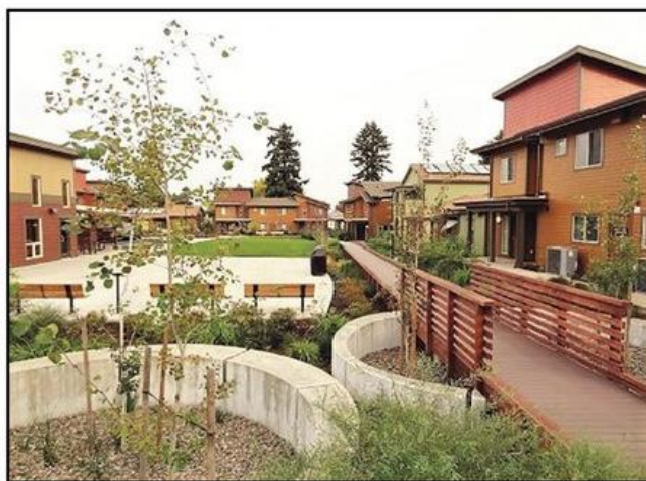
intergenerational model to create a community with adults with autism and other disabilities in mind. The goal, said Mark Dunham, a consultant serving as the initiative's project director, is to "use supportive community as a springboard to maximize individual potential."

Too often, Dunham said, housing ends up segregating by income, ability and age. Social isolation sets in, which is a major problem for many older adults and adults with disabilities. "Sharing human capital among neighbors, alongside whatever direct support services residents may need, can be a great strategy for building individual and community well-being," said Dunham. "It can also be a cost-effective solution" for optimizing resources during a time of tightening finances. "Being a thoughtful, engaged neighbor doesn't cost anything, but it can make a real difference," he said.

The Plan

Preliminary plans call for a 60- to 70-unit community of both affordable and market rate apartments and common space for residents to interact. A location with access to public transportation and walkable amenities is essential to ensuring residents are fully integrated into the larger community, as well as opportunities for employment and social engagement.

The initiative's progress is being driven by a new, 12-member task force, including public and private sector leaders and experts in aging and disability services, housing and community development. It's a complex undertaking. Dunham said the task force's current focus is on establishing the project's program and feasibility and identifying the site and development



The housing initiative will adapt a model utilized in communities like Bridge Meadows, in Portland, Oregon, which serves families involved with the foster care system and older adults.

partner it will require to move forward.

It also will be unique. "This project will inevitably look, feel and function differently from other communities that have adapted this approach," said Dunham. "This is a person-centered, organic approach, so it'll have to be attuned to the needs and the strengths of the people who live there."

Several funders, including HCAS and The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, have provided seed funding to support planning activities. Dunham said more support is being sought. "We're actively seeking venture philanthropists who are committed to housing and service innovation and can help us realize the potential of this approach."

Meanwhile, HCAS, now entering its 25th year, is looking ahead to its next quarter-century. The organization is not planning to enter the housing business, said Ballinger, but instead is excited to help catalyze the partners and resources necessary to develop the project and bring this vision to life. "We see this as an opportunity to help pioneer an approach that could eventually be replicated throughout the Baltimore area and the entire state.

"The need is there, and we believe we're onto a real solution."

For more information, visit www.howard-autism.org/housing-initiative.