

New units will add to Stamford's affordable housing supply

By Liz Skalka Updated 12:57 pm, Thursday, April 20, 2017



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Morris Mendes, a resident at Mutual Housing Association of Southwestern Connecticut's Fairfield Commons development, speaks at a groundbreaking for new units on April 18, 2017.

STAMFORD — A life spent helping others get back on track was flipped on its head after Morris Mendes suffered a stroke.

"All of a sudden, I had a stroke and I had to recover," the former drug and alcohol counselor said. "I lost my apartment. I didn't have a place to live."

But since 2015, Mendes, 62, has had a home at Fairfield Commons, an affordable development run by Mutual Housing Association of Southwestern Connecticut that serves low-income people who, because of drug addiction or health issues, need to live in supportive housing.

The nonprofit developer on Tuesday announced its ground-breaking on six new one-bedroom units in the 25-unit complex on Fairfield Avenue.

"There's a need for housing on so many levels, not only for people who may have some challenges that the rest of us don't share, but for lower-income folks to be able to have a safe, affordable place to live," Mutual Housing Authority CEO Renée Dobos said.

MHA partnered with Laurel House — a provider of addiction services — Supportive Housing Works and Stamford's housing authority, Charter Oak Communities, on the new units, which will be occupied by people who were once homeless. Nearly all the funding for the project comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Dobos said.

MHA has three other Stamford developments: Parkside Gables, Trinity Park and Friendship House, clustered within several blocks on the West Side.

Parkside Gables residents last year requested the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority Board review management practices at the 69-unit West Main Street development, complaining of questionable rent charges and quality-of-life issues.

MHA owns and operates 15 affordable developments in Stamford, Norwalk, Bridgeport, Fairfield, Trumbull and Wilton.

The organization is separate from Charter Oak Communities, which has more than 20 affordable housing sites in Stamford. Last week, Charter Oak marked the opening of Summer Place, its newest development with 48 units for those 55-and-older. It replaces the Czescik Homes — which the city plans to raze — situated in a flood zone along the Rippowam River.

MHA is an important partner in creating affordable housing, which the city could not do on its own, Mayor David Martin said.

"We're full of bureaucracy, regulation and red tape – it takes us longer and costs us more, he said. "And most importantly, it comes down to actually delivering the services to individuals. Sometimes we can't see beyond the application to know who really benefits the most.'

MHA purchased five historic homes that comprise Fairfield Commons in 2001 and 2002, and built its first new structure there in 2015.

The residents who move in next year will have access to on-site supportive services.

"When people are living on the street for a very long time, it's difficult to transition back," Dobos said.

Six units will make a small dent in a homeless population estimated at 300 people in Stamford and Greenwich, according to a 2016 count by the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness.

Fairfield County continuously struggles to keep up with demand for affordable housing in an area with a high cost of living.

"We can't build them fast enough," Dobos said. "The demand is great, especially in Fairfield County because incomes are so high."

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