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New East Bay affordable home complex opens for veterans, homeless residents

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By JUDITH PRIEVE | Bay Area News Group | May 15, 2022

A dozen years after it was envisioned, an affordable apartment complex for low-income veterans and others facing homelessness has opened in Old Town Pittsburgh.

Over the years, the planned Veterans Square apartments at 901 W. Los Medanos St. has been both supported and criticized for its prime downtown location, but at the grand opening

Wednesday, one could only hear the accolades .

"I'm very grateful," new resident Dawn Drewer said in an interview before the grand opening where she was a featured speaker. "It's just hard to believe I have a place of my own."

A Danville native and former Pittsburg homeowner, Drewer, now 58, said she fell on hard times following a divorce and medical problems that stemmed from an accident years earlier, and her parents died last year, leaving her with little support. Over the years, she has lived with her boyfriend's mother, her sister and most recently in shelters in Concord and Richmond before applying for a Veterans Square apartment, for which she pays 30% of her disability income. "I'm in a really nice area in downtown," she said, adding that security measures help keep residents safe.

Located close to restaurants, bus services and the Pittsburg Center BART Station, the Satellite Affordable Housing Associates' Veterans Square features solar thermal systems and other green features, as well as room for a community garden. The three-story building includes 28 one-bedroom and two two-bedroom apartments, ranging from 575 to 783 square feet, with an on-site manager.

"Satellite Affordable Housing Associates is thrilled to continue our work to serve veterans and end veteran homelessness in Contra Costa County," Susan Friedland, chief executive officer of SAHA, said in a statement. "Affordable homes for veterans are desperately needed throughout the county and the state. According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, there are over 10,000 veterans currently experiencing homelessness in California alone. We can change this."

The Pittsburg housing project targets people earning 30% to 50% of the area median income, which is \$87,900 for a one-person household in Contra Costa County, according to officials. Working with referrals from several agencies, the Pittsburg Housing Authority provided 29 vouchers for Veterans Square to low-income residents in need of housing.

Nineteen of the apartment will serve homeless veterans through HUD's Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program.

The remaining 10 apartments have been set aside for others who are homeless or at risk for homelessness.

The \$19 million Satellite Affordable Housing Associates housing project broke ground in November 2020 and was financed through a variety of sources, according to one of its major lenders.

Housing Trust Silicon Valley provided a low-cost loan for the project through Apple Affordable Housing Fund grants it received. In recent years, the tech giant donated \$150 million to support new Bay Area affordable housing projects such as Veterans Square by making loans to qualified developers.

"Our mission is to provide safe affordable housing solutions for those in need," Noni Ramos, CEO of Housing Trust said in a statement. "Grand openings like this are so exciting because they mark a new beginning for those who bravely served our country."

Other financing sources include the city of Pittsburg, the Pittsburg Housing Authority, the California Department of Housing and Community Development, the California Tax Credit

Allocation Committee, the California Debt Limit Allocation Committee, Contra Costa County, Raymond James Tax Credit Fund, Chase and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Julie Mahowald, chief financial officer for Housing Trust Silicon Valley, said in an interview that the developer put together a complex web of financing for the apartment project and contacted the nonprofit to secure part of the funding needed to build Veterans Square.

Though Veterans Square is one of the smaller veterans housing projects of some 600 that Housing Trust Silicon Valley has helped make happen, Mahowald said it is a good size for people to get to know and help support one another.

"It's on the smaller side, but being small, it can become a close-knit community and people can keep an eye on each other," she said.

Drewer said being on the second floor facing downtown allows her to watch the comings and goings around her from the safety of her own home.

"It's hard to believe, I've worked so hard to get to this point," Drewer said, noting she had been on waiting lists before but had never been offered an affordable apartment. "It's just so refreshing. It's just so awesome."

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