

# Campus for seniors wins award for livability

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What makes a community livable as we age? Nearby health care and affordable housing are a few of the elements in a senior-friendly environment. A pleasant setting would be nice too.

NorthCenter Senior Campus at Irving Park Road and Western Avenue in Chicago was recently named one of four national winners of the 2009 Livable Communities Award given annually by AARP and the National Association of Home Builders. The awards shine a spotlight on builders, remodelers and developers that build homes and communities with features that improve everyday comfort, safety and personal independence for their residents. Elements considered include transportation, walkability, accessibility, safety, shopping, housing, health and recreation.

"The NorthCenter Campus absolutely embodies what is important when assessing whether or not a community is livable," said Elinor Ginzler, senior vice president for livable communities at AARP in Washington, D.C. "The community has features that promote successful aging."

NorthCenter Senior Campus is set on eight acres, once the site of Martha Washington Hospital. The development includes two affordable rental buildings for seniors and a condominium project for those 55 and older. The buildings feature amenities such as fitness centers and libraries.

The campus also includes the Advocate Health Center Irving medical building, which houses physicians and offers lab and X-ray services. The facility serves the seniors who live there as well as others. Advocate Health Care owned the old hospital that was on the property and donated the land to the city for the NorthCenter project.

The campus buildings ring a large green space with decorative fountains, trees and a half mile of walkways.

Vivian Williford, 78, was one of the first residents to move in three years ago. She lives at the St. Vincent DePaul Residence, an affordable apartment building developed and operated by Catholic Charities. The building has 86 units. Rents range from about \$300 to \$500 a month.

The first floor of the building includes a satellite senior center run by the city of Chicago. The center offers activities and a daily lunch for seniors from the center and from around the neighborhood.

"This place is livable because it offers so many opportunities," said Williford, who moved to the building from senior housing in Florida. She takes a lot of classes at the senior center. Her doctor is just across the park in the medical building.

Williford's fifth-floor apartment has a view of the park, which opened in September. And her apartment is across the hall from a rooftop terrace.

"We sit there at night on warm evenings," said Williford. "It's lovely."

The campus was designed by the Lakota Group, a Chicago-based planning firm. The firm has been involved in other senior housing developments, including Lake Forest Place in Lake Forest, The Moorings in Arlington Heights for Presbyterian Homes, Waterford in Aurora for Alden Network, and Victory Lakes in Lindenhurst for Victory Memorial Hospital.

The original idea was to create a campus for seniors who lived in the neighborhood and wanted to stay there, but no longer wanted to own and care for a single-family house.

"It's hard to find a big site like this in the city," said John LaMotte, principal at the Lakota Group. The site is large enough to accommodate the buildings, central green area and another park at the corner of Belle Plaine and Oakley avenues.

The residential buildings provide housing for a mix of incomes. In addition to the St. Vincent De Paul Residence, the campus includes the 104-unit Martha

Washington apartment building, developed by the nonprofit Technical Assistance Corp. for Housing. Rents start at about \$578. Both apartment buildings are full. Those interested in an apartment can put their name on a waiting list.

Jose A. Flores, 63, and his wife, Luz, live on the campus at Belle Plaine Commons, a five-story condominium building with 92 units developed by North Center Associates. The couple moved to the campus last summer. Sixteen condominiums are still for sale. Prices range from \$195,000 to \$299,000.

They had been living in a condominium on Lake Shore Drive, but they grew tired of the noise and the fast pace of the neighborhood. "It's very pleasant here," said Jose.

He's quick to add that the campus isn't isolated, but rather a part of the neighborhood, a key element for a livable community. The couple both work. Sometimes Jose bikes to work or takes the bus. They shop at local stores. "Everything is close," he said.

This design encourages interaction with the surrounding neighborhood, notes AARP's Ginzler, as the NorthCenter Senior Campus is near restaurants, grocery stores and other shops. And though the residential buildings are age-restricted, Ginzler said it's important that the campus is located in a neighborhood for all ages.

"Most people want to mix with other generations," she said.

Friendships improve the sense of community, too, residents say. Since many of them moved to the buildings at the same time when the campus opened, they say it was easy to make friends. Residents have formed new relationships, something that can be hard to do when living alone in a single-family home. The Floreses recently hosted dessert for the residents on their floor as part of a traveling potluck party.

At the St. Vincent DePaul Residence, Williford's closest friend is 91-year-old Ida Davidson. The two connected immediately because they were among the only bridge players in the building. They shop together at the nearby Trader Joe's and Whole Foods grocery stores. They see each other every day.

"I've moved 26 times in my life," said Williford. "I have friends here. And now I feel at home."