

United Way focuses on affordable housing Units being built for disabled residents



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Zachary Hamrick competes in triathlons.

But even at the age of 22 his ability to communicate with other people is extremely limited.

He can cook his own meals.

The difficulties he has interacting with others because of his autism, however, would make it very difficult for him to hold down a full-time job.

So finding a place where he can live independently has been a major challenge.

"There really wasn't anyplace," said his father, Stephen. "He requires close monitoring."

That will change around Dec. 1 — the target date for Bergen County's United Way to open its latest affordable housing development: Crescent Commons in Allendale. Like most of its projects, this one was constructed in partnership with the Madeline Corp., a Palisades Park non-profit that specializes in building affordable housing.

"All the tenants have been selected," said United Way President Tom Toronto. "Some of them will be living independently for the first time."

The \$5.6 million project, funded by the United Way and the town, county, state and federal governments, continues the non-profit's focus on creating affordable housing for the disabled and those in financial need.

That's been the organization's priority for more than the past half-dozen years.

Crescent Commons will house 42 individuals with developmental disabilities and four with multiple sclerosis, in partnership with the MS Society. The residents will be provided with support services from various agencies that care for the disabled, but not 24/7 care.

In addition, the United Way/Madeline Corp. partnership is building a separate six-unit development on the property, with condos to be purchased by low-income working families.

But nothing in the development's appearance screams "low-income housing." Toronto took great pride during a tour in pointing out the high-quality materials and an architectural design that makes the structure fit in with its upper-income suburban surroundings.

"We've had several people walk up and ask, 'When's the sales office opening?'" Toronto chuckled. "That's a nice testament to the quality of the work."

The Allendale project is one of two the United Way is opening next month. The other, Fairview Crest, is a renovated building of 12 condo units on Fairview Avenue in Fairview.

"We're mixing market and affordable units," Toronto noted.

"The market-rate condos will probably go for around \$275,000, while the affordable units will be around \$200,000."

Fairview Crest is a \$2 million project that is turning an abandoned factory into well-constructed homes within an easy commute of the Meadowlands and New York City, he said.

The United Way provided two-thirds of the funding, with the remainder coming from the county, he said. The non-profit's goal is to break even on the cost through the sales of the units. That's how the United Way replenishes its rotating construction fund, taking the money from the sales of its units and putting that into a pool used to develop new projects.

While the non-profit has several other units in various stages of development, the latest one on which it has broken ground is a project in which Toronto takes particular pride.

"It's just two homes, but it will be the first of its kind in the state," Toronto said, as he pointed out the foundations being laid on a suburban road in Ramsey. "It's specially designed to serve folks with autism. We went to all the schools for autism in the region for suggestions. We contacted the Southwest Arizona Research Center, which has put out a monograph on how to design and build housing for folks with autism."

Once finished, Toronto explained, the new buildings will pro-



vide supportive housing, with round-the-clock staffing, giving adults with autism their first opportunity to live independently. The care services will be provided by New Horizons in Autism, a non-profit agency based in Monmouth County.

These are people with far more severe disabilities than Zachary Hamrick. The likelihood of their being able to live without constant support staff is remote at best.

What especially excites Toronto about the project is that it will allow several New Jersey families to be united with their adult relatives with autism.

"A lot of high-need autistic people have to be served out of state because there aren't the residential services here," he said. "This will give people the ability to live together in the same community or nearby their families."

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The United Way's Crescent Commons in Allendale is scheduled to open around Dec. 1.