



UpFront: Housing

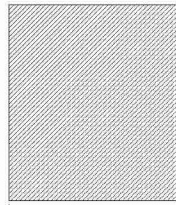
# Building Special Needs Housing

Meeting the needs of this population segment  
can be a win-win for municipalities

By Diane Riley, Executive Director, Supportive Housing Association of New Jersey



**I**n an interview with former Allendale Mayor Liz White and Tom Toronto, Executive Director, Bergen County United Way, the pair discussed the key ingredients to their successful municipal/ non-profit partnership to build special needs affordable housing.





**How did you tackle the issue of affordable housing in Allendale?**

**Liz White:** We looked at our plan and we decided that the best thing to do would be to just tackle it head-on and actually provide the housing to the population that really needed it.

And we looked at our special needs population and realized we had residents in our own town who were getting on in years and the only space they could

find or their son with special needs was in South Jersey, nowhere near their family. So that was the start of us saying, “This is a great opportunity for Allendale, for the special needs population, and to address our affordable housing obligations.”

**Tom Toronto:** We were just starting out in terms of being an affordable housing developer. And we had the incredible good fortune to connect with a governing body that, as Liz said, decided to be proactive. We, I think, set a different standard, and challenged some conventional wisdom at the state in terms of how housing for people with

developmental disabilities could be done. The Orchard Commons project was the first project that allowed for consumer choice. So, empowering folks with developmental disabilities to choose where they live as opposed from having to subscribe, if you will, to a service provider.



**How does this project benefit the community?**

**LW:** We communicated to residents that this was a positive thing, that it would help our affordable housing obligations, but really it would help put a small dent in the list of people waiting for affordable housing in the special needs population—some even in our own town. These fabulous residents just are such a bonus to our community. They’re involved in our churches, work in our stores, volunteer in our library, our Boy Scouts, our Girl Scouts. So many of our neighborhood organizations get involved with our special needs population on a weekly basis.

It’s been a huge win-win. We were hoping that it would be positive, but it has far exceeded our expectations.

**TT:** There’s a lot of reasons for municipalities to take a look at supportive housing as a way to help fulfill their COAH obligation. Certainly consumer demands and then, secondly, the fact that there are incentives for towns wanting to participate and construct this style of housing.

When you produce supportive housing to take advantage of a two-for-one density bonus for supportive housing. So there’s a lot of reasons for municipalities to take a look at supportive housing as a way to help fulfill their COAH obligation.

**Other Needs Housing**

**People forget that special needs has a variety of faces, so it doesn’t always have to be one type of housing to enrich the community in many ways.**

**Tom Toronto, Executive Director, Bergen County United Way,** notes that he has worked with Allendale to create housing options for several different populations, including two single family homes for veterans. “We’ve completed family home ownership housing in Allendale. In fact, two of those homes were two folks who were renters, two young men with developmental disabilities, became home owners in that project. They also have an inventory of senior housing as well.”

**Former Mayor Liz White** notes that the town’s efforts continue to expand. “We’re doing additional affordable senior housing and we’re actually doing emergency responder housing because many of our emergency responders cannot afford to live in the town. So we will be doing reduced market rate housing for some of our first responders because our first responders are such a critical part of our town.”



### **What are the biggest challenges in developing this type of housing?**

**LW:** Well, I think on the municipal side and I would hazard to guess on the development side, it's money. We have a municipal housing trust fund, but we have spent so much money because the state legislature has not taken on this issue of figuring out the quotas for affordable housing, that we have spent, I want to say \$325,000 now, on professionals to litigate this issue when Allendale has actually done the building already.

This money could have gone to houses to people who needed it, yet we're having to pay lawyers and planners and everybody else to go to the courts and justify a plan that we think is fabulous. And

quite frankly, everybody, the courts, the presiding judge, they agree that Allendale has done its due diligence and done it well.

**TT:** The fact that everything has to be done via a court proceeding is simply wrong. It's expensive. It's intimidating for some municipalities and it slows everything to a crawl. It's high time that this issue be addressed by the legislature in a common sense approach to affordable housing.

We are dealing with these templates that don't recognize the dynamism in the state, the changing nature of housing. It doesn't recognize the cost differentials between the north and the south in terms of the cost of real estate, and the cost of building.



### **If you could give advice to municipalities who might be interested, what would it be?**

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**LW:** Do it. Just do it. A, it's the right thing to do. B, there's so many positives in terms of making sure that you are meeting your affordable housing obligations yet taking care of a population that needs to have proper good housing.

**TT:** It's obvious when you're in Allendale, these are sources of pride for the community and I think they reinforce the character of the community and they further develop the sense of community. To my mind, the only answer to the confusion and the complexity is to remember that everyone needs a place to live and the best way to get your arms around this problem is to simply decide you're going to take charge and build something. 🛠️