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New Connecticut apartment complex offers opportunity for independence for the developmentally disabled

By DON STACOM

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In bedroom of the apartment they are scheduled to move into next week, brothers Scott Emery (left) and Craig Emery (right) work with their father Mike Emery Scott Masson (left), 30, setting up furniture. The Arc of the Farmington Valley, Inc. has developed a 40-unit apartment complex that includes 10 units for adults with intellectual disabilities to live independently from their families for the first time. Two aspects of these specialty apartments make them a national model. 1) The apartment complex is integrated, house people with and without disabilities and 2) the apartments employ technology that help make the specialty apartments safe for people with intellectual disabilities, as well as more affordable than group homes. Photograph by Mark

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For nearly 20 developmentally disabled young people, the new Bear Woods apartments in Canton offer their first chance to live outside their families' homes.

"I feel really good to be here — it makes me feel like a grownup," said Nick Sinacori, 26, who until now has had to live with his parents at their house in Simsbury.

From the outside Bear Woods looks much like any other newly built apartment complex, but officials at Favarh believe it's a model that could transform housing for the developmentally disabled.



Nick Sinacori outside Bear Woods. (Don Stacom)

They're opening a similar complex in Bloomfield this summer for middle-aged and older tenants, and are hearing from other organizations for the developmentally disabled inquiring about the logistics, financing and day-to-day operations.

"To our knowledge, no other apartment building has combined the key features we have," said Stephen Morris executive director of the Arc of the Farmington Valley, also known as Favarh.

The nonprofit agency lined up state and federal funding, private donations and tax incentives that made it possible to reserve 10 apartments at Bear Woods exclusively for its clients. Regan Development Corp. constructed the three-story building and manages the 30 other apartments there.

The Favarh units have special accessibility features, affordable rents, a specialty meal program and digital technology that enables staff to help adjust temperatures and lighting without entering the apartments.



In the dining area of the apartment he is scheduled to move into next week, Scott Masson (left), 30, sets up a table with Stephen Morris, executive director of The Arc of the Farmington Valley, Inc., and his mom, Linda Masson. The 40-unit apartment complex developed by Favrah includes 10 units for adults with intellectual disabilities to live independently from their families for the first time. Two aspects of these specialty apartments make them a national model. 1) The apartment complex is integrated - it houses people with and without disabilities and 2) the apartments employ technology that help make the specialty apartments safe for people with intellectual disabilities, as well as more affordable than group homes. Photograph by Mark Mirko | mmirko@courant.com (Mark Mirko/Mark Mirko)

Favrah will staff a lobby office around the clock, and will provide van transportation to the tenants' supported jobs. Sinacori, for instance, works at BeanZ & Co. coffee shop in Avon, where he serves food, cleans, runs a cash register and handles other tasks.

Each of the two-bedroom units will have two tenants, and almost all of them are relocating from family homes or, in a few cases, group homes. One three-bedroom unit will have three tenants.

“For most this will be their first apartment, the first time moving out of the family home. It’s very exciting — something of this scale has never happened before,” Morris said.

The new tenants include a kitchen worker at the Hospital For Special Care in New Britain, warehouse workers at US Electrical Services Inc. in Middletown, and assemblers at Plymouth Spring in Bristol and LeGrand in West Hartford.

The new complex on Commerce Drive, which is opening this month, provides an inclusive environment, Favrah said. A nearby Favrah facility will cook meals in advance; tenants can order what they want each week, and the food will be kept in refrigerated storage in the building.



A 40-unit apartment complex developed by The Arc of the Farmington Valley, includes 10 units for adults with intellectual disabilities to live independently from their families for the first time. Photograph by Mark Mirko | mmirko@courant.com (Mark Mirko/Mark Mirko)

“We’ve learned over the years that it’s difficult to get people to eat healthy if you’re not cooking, so we built a commercial kitchen preparing healthy meals,” he said.

“There’s an inverse relationship with the health of food and the more independent living someone has. We didn’t want to put all of this energy and enthusiasm into independent housing only to see people’s health decline.”

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The apartments have 42-inch-wide doors and floors throughout the building are hardwood, all designed to make getting around easier for people in wheelchairs or with walkers.

Even though this first wave of tenants is young, Bear Woods is designed for the long term. “We want this to be a place where people can age in place. Sometimes they need adaptive equipment as they get older — so we put reinforced ceilings in the 10 apartments,” Morris

said. “So we can put in a Hoyer lift. With a regular building that’s very expensive to retrofit, but if you’ve put in extra-strong joists and plywood it’s relatively low cost.” The agency is getting ready to open a very similar complex on Cottage Grove Road in Bloomfield. Morris expects it will accommodate 19 clients.

This goal is to provide an alternative to supported care in a family home or life in a standard group home.

“Group homes are really expensive. They’ve been the big thing for the past several decades, and they’re good — they’ll always be here,” Morris said.

But his agency talked with its staff, clients and their parents when it designed the apartments. Morris said that helps set them apart from rooms in group homes, which are usually remodeled from existing buildings and can’t offer as many amenities.



Don Stacom

Don Stacom is a reporter for The Courant covering New Britain, Bristol, Southington, Plainville, Berlin and transportation. He has previously reported on Enfield, Torrington, the Farmington Valley and Somers, and is a former editor at The Register-Citizen in Torrington and former assistant city editor at The Republican-American in Waterbury.