

OPINION

Editorial: People with disabilities deserve more housing options in CT

the Hearst Connecticut Media Editorial Board

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Ojakian Commons in Simsbury, Conn. is the region's first affordable housing complex made accessible for people with disabilities. The complex, geared towards people with MS, fills a gap in the housing market for affordable and accessible housing.

Turning a disability into an opportunity seems virtually impossible, which makes Ken Regan's story all the more compelling.

As detailed in a story by Hearst Connecticut Media reporter Erin Kayata, Regan was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 15 years ago. He says it "woke me up to the needs out there."

For people with disabilities, those needs can be formidable when seeking housing. Doorways are often too narrow to accommodate wheelchairs, light switches are out of reach, and too many buildings lack ramps.

Regan, vice president of the New York-based Regan Development Corp., recognized a business opportunity and a chance to help people.

His company built Ojakian Commons in Simsbury, the first affordable supportive housing development for people with disabilities in New England. The company previously built a similar project in New Jersey.

The project reached beyond boilerplate guidelines by inviting input from people with MS. As a result, Ojakian Commons has automatic door openers, slide-out shelving in closets and cabinets, accessible showers and more. It even provides a shuttle service for residents who don't drive.

Forty of the units are specifically for people with MS, with seven others reserved for people with other disabilities.

Regan offers takeaways from his experience that other developers should consider.

“In all new construction now, it's easy to do and the cost of doing it upfront is much less than if you were to go back and try to rework an apartment for accessibility after the fact,” he said. “There's things, if you think about them upfront before you build buildings, it's not hugely expensive. There's no reason at this point anyone building new construction apartments in Connecticut shouldn't be doing this off the bat. It makes it easier and there's a very strong demand for this.”

The words “very strong demand” might pique the interest of any developer. No landlord wants an empty apartment, but they are also likely to resist a costly retrofit.

The Hartford Courant reported last week that the new Bear Woods apartments in Canton provide housing for young adults who are developmentally disabled, while the builder is planning a similar facility for older tenants.

These are small, but welcome, measures of progress. Though the Fair Housing Act defines standards for accessibility, so much of existing construction in the Northeast predates its introduction 33 years ago.

The consequences for much of the disabled population is profound. Limited housing options can ultimately put further stress on state and municipal resources as some people are left with few choices beyond shelters or nursing homes.

People with limited housing opportunities also tend to lack the financial resources to challenge policies. That doesn't mean issues don't exist. The Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities received 52 complaints from July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020 related to physical disability.

People with disabilities face obstacles every day. Connecticut cannot deem itself an inclusive state until it offers dignified options on where they can live.

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