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Home sweet homes created by NCCH

By LISA FREDRICKSON

The houses look like so many in neighborhoods throughout Northeast Ohio with their manicured lawns, fresh paint and tidy front porches. But through the efforts of many people, these homes have been renovated and specially equipped to accommodate each unique and individual resident. They are safe, comfortable and affordable community homes developed and maintained by North Coast Community Homes (NCCH) for individuals with mental retardation, mental illness and developmental disabilities.

Years ago, people with mental retardation, mental illness and other disabilities, which account for about three percent of our population, were either cared for at home by parents or placed in an institution. By the 1970s, community based group housing became a popular alternative for these challenged individuals to attain some level of independence and self-sufficiency. In the early 1980s, the State of Ohio mandated to all county boards of mental retardation and developmental disabilities that an assessment of local needs for community-based housing be implemented, thereby creating the impetus for NCCH, which was incorporated in 1984.

In 1985, NCCH hired Steve McPeake who began working with the Cuyahoga County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (mr/dd) to develop housing for individuals with mental retardation. Initial funding was provided by the Cleveland Foundation, and, with government funding, 54 group homes were built.

In 1992, the state limited the number of residents in a group home to four non-related adults eliminating large group homes as an option for the mentally retarded and disabled. To provide residential choices, NCCH began purchasing and renovating properties to create community-based small group and family homes, apartments and condominiums. Today NCCH has 183 properties with 909 tenants in 68

municipalities.

The process of developing a property begins when the county boards of mr/dd refer an individual or group of individuals who want to live together to NCCH. The clients then meet with the staff of NCCH to discuss in which community they want to live and specific needs of the clients to determine the

necessary modifications that need to be made to the property. NCCH develops rental properties for individuals who are ambulatory, or able to walk, and for those individuals who are more disabled and require ramps, wider interior hallways and special bathroom facilities to accommodate wheelchairs. They are

very sensitive to the needs of each individual and are constantly revising design criteria. "We care a lot about the people who live in our homes," said Mr. McPeake, NCCH president and ceo.

The counties in which the properties are located are responsible for paying for all support services, but tenants themselves pay rent. Most NCCH tenants work, often in a sheltered workshop, and rent is typically no more than 30 to 40 percent of their income. To keep rents affordable, NCCH manages each property with their in-house maintenance and landscaping staff and develops a property only when sufficient funds are available to minimize the need for borrowing.

Over the years, NCCH has gained much experience and knowledge in developing facilities for their clients, and tenant safety is their number one priority. All properties have interconnected, hardwired fire and carbon monoxide alarms. Slightly less than half of their properties are fully accessible for wheelchair use and have sprinkling systems to retard the spread of fire and give tenants with disabilities extra time to vacate the home. According to Mr. McPeake, NCCH goes way beyond government requirements in developing its properties

The desire to maintain a high level of quality and



safety in its properties coupled with diminishing government funds prompted the NCCH to look to the private sector for much needed dollars. "We didn't want government funding to define who we are or be restricted by that money in terms of quality and home safety features," said Mr. McPeake. The NCCH began raising money in 1998 by seeking support from foundations, corporations and individuals and launched its first-ever fundraiser with a little golf outing that raised \$13,000. In 2006, the annual golf outing netted more than \$122,000 and was supported by 31 corporate sponsors.

This year, NCCH continues to reach out with its first major benefit scheduled for Saturday, September 8 at a Waite Hill estate. "Home Sweet Homes: An Evening At BeauRavine Farm," presented by National City, will be a casual, elegant evening of entertainment with dinner catered by Gavi's Restaurant and music by the "No-Name Band." According to Barbara Rosenthal, NCCH's Vice President of Resource Development, the gala is being organized by a dynamic and tireless group of young "movers and shakers" of the Cleveland area and will help increase community awareness. "This fundraiser will introduce us to young people NCCH has not been exposed to," Ms. Rosenthal said.

The September gala is just one way NCCH continues to grow and reach out to new demographics. NCCH has taken the lead in developing a statewide housing association called the Disability Housing Network to establish best practices and share ideas to improve the quality, safety, comfort and affordability of community-based housing, the first of its kind in Ohio and the U.S. NCCH also offers the Parent Participation Project that brings parents of three or four families together to form a consortium to

utilize NCCH's expertise to find housing for their children with disabilities. The families together own the property and contract with NCCH to develop the property to their children's needs and provide property management for the home.

Since 2000, between 50 and 60 volunteers of NCCH provide support to the agency. The North Coast Neighbors assist with mailings and the annual meeting, help with spring and fall gardening and clean-up projects at NCCH homes and work at the golf outings. Each year Neighbors hosts a picnic for NCCH's tenants in September and a reverse raffle fundraiser in November. NCCH also has an endowment fund totaling more than \$366,000 to assure its future viability. "We have a moral obligation to keep NCCH solid," said Ms. Rosenthal. "Many of our clients will be with us *till* their death, and we have to be fiscally responsible," she added.

NCCH has for 22 years succeeded in providing men and women with disabilities safe and comfortable housing in the communities of their choice giving them maximum independence. It continues to make a difference in the lives of hundreds of individuals and their families who face unique challenges each day. NCCH develops three to four homes per year, but, according to Ms. Rosenthal, its greatest challenge is providing for the significant number of individuals who remain on the residential waiting lists at each of the county boards.

For more information about North Coast Community Homes, call (216) 662-1880 or visit www.ncch.org.