

ON A CHILLY Michigan morning in late October 2004, a group of community leaders dug shovels into a box of dirt in a vacant parking lot on Detroit's northeast side. As flash bulbs popped and more than 100 guests gathered for the "groundbreaking" politely clapped, participants could feel progress, hope, and renewal in the air.

That vacant parking lot will soon boast beautiful, safe, and affordable senior housing residences. But those residences are only part of the plan. One day, the area will be the site of an entire "village."

A NEW VISION

In 1996, St. John Health, an eight-hospital system, the largest provider of inpatient care in southeast Michigan, purchased Holy Cross Hospital in northeast Detroit. St. John Health then invested more than \$25 million in the Holy Cross campus and renamed it St. John NorthEast Community Hospital. As is the case of many other urban hospitals across the country, bringing the campus, which was constructed more than 50 years ago, into the 21st century, presented significant challenges. The system also needed to determine how to best use this campus in balance with its other two inpatient facilities in the city and with its community health, parish nursing, and school-based clinic programs. After careful consideration, St. John Health's leaders decided to phase out inpatient services there, primarily because of the cost that would be required to operate a facility with low occupancy rates and to modernize it sufficiently to meet today's inpatient standards.

But the system's leaders chose not to close the campus. They decided, because of its importance to the surrounding community, to revitalize NorthEast, bringing new life, new services, and a new sense of possibility to the campus. St. John Health continued offering emergency and ambulatory services to area residents. Meanwhile, its leaders began developing a new vision for the campus.

CONNER CREEK VILLAGE

With area residents in mind, St. John Health's leaders pondered what to do with the hospital campus. After conducting a series of meetings

It Takes a Village

*A Detroit Health Care
System Makes Senior
Housing the Core of a
Renewed Community*

BY ELLIOT JOSEPH

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and interviews with residents, the system's leaders identified the local population's needs: job training, career development, employment, health care, housing, and a safe community environment.

To meet these needs, St. John Health's leaders developed a plan to turn the old hospital site into a community-focused campus. Announced in April 2004, the campus will be called (for a tributary that flows into the Detroit River) "Conner Creek Village: A Partnership for Healthy Lives." The center will offer a variety of services and programs, including a school of nursing and allied health professions, emergency and primary health care, management for chronic conditions, job training, health education, a day care center, and senior independent living residences. Conner Creek Village's mission is to provide accessible, high-

quality health care, education, and lifecycle services that create and support a healthy community.

THE HOUSING COMPONENT

Conner Creek Village is a collaborative effort by St. John Health and other organizations. St. John Health, which first envisioned the project, has invested in it a combination of capital, intensive staff time, and operation costs. Additional investments will come from each of the partner organizations.

Housing will be a key component of the project. In June 2004, St. John Health announced that Detroit Community Initiative (DCI) had signed on as an official partner. DCI, a not-for-profit organization committed to providing safe, healthy, and prosperous neighborhoods for Detroit families, will develop independent-living residences for senior citizens. The housing component, which will occupy 4.8 acres of unoccupied land on the campus, will be done in phases. Work on the first phase, a \$6.3 million development funded through a combination of federal tax credits and mortgage loans, began in November 2004. DCI is collaborating in the project with NRP Holdings LLC, a development firm. DCI has already relocated its administrative offices to the new Conner Creek Village campus.

The first phase of the housing component will be a three-story structure containing 48 affordable apartments for senior citizens. Nineteen will be one-bedroom units of approximately 655 square feet of living space; the other 29 will be two-bedroom units and will have 855 square feet

SUMMARY

Faced with the question of what to do with an aging, under-used hospital in northeast Detroit, St. John Health, Warren, MI, turned to the community for help in developing a plan for transforming the campus in a way that would better meet local needs. Through meetings and interviews with local residents, St. John Health learned that community members needed job training, career development, employment, health care, housing, and a safe environment.

To meet these needs, St. John Health developed a plan to convert the facility, St. John NorthEast Community Hospital, into a senior housing community called "Conner Creek: A Partnership for Healthy Lives." Inpatient care has been

phased out. Now, St. John Health is working with local partners to build affordable, safe, and attractive apartments for seniors.

Plans call for Conner Creek to offer a wide variety of supportive services to complement the housing and to meet needs identified by the community. A nursing school, chronic care services, job training, and recreational activity areas are among the offerings under consideration. Townhouses may be added in the future. St. John Health's leaders say that Conner Creek may prove to be a model for urban health care sites in need of revitalization.

of space. Twelve of these units will be reserved for seniors with physical impairments or long-term health concerns. A local firm, Matrix Human Services, will provide supportive services for the special-needs residents. The phase one development will include laundry facilities on each floor and community rooms, which can be used for computers, arts and crafts activities, and other social and recreational services.

Michael Fisher, DCI's president and CEO, is passionate about the project. "There is a serious lack of affordable, safe, and attractive housing options for seniors in northeast Detroit," he says. "With the development of these new senior residences at Conner Creek Village, lifelong Detroit residents won't be forced to leave the neighborhood they call home in order to find an appropriate and affordable housing option."

Completion of the first phase is scheduled for October. If interest from the community in this development is as high as St. John Health's and DCI's leaders anticipate, a second, 48-unit senior independent living residence will be constructed on the site.

A MODEL FOR OTHERS?

Enrollment for residence in the new development is open to all seniors aged 55 and older, although each applicant will have to undergo a standard screening process for qualification. For those seniors who qualify, rental payments will be determined according to a sliding scale based on household income, as determined by federal guidelines under the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program. Rates for the one-bedroom units will range from approximately \$310 to \$620 per month; the two-bedroom units will range from \$370 to \$740 monthly. Open enrollment for interested seniors was expected to begin in March.

DCI has made tentative plans for a third phase of development that could include market-priced townhomes for residents of any age.

Meanwhile, a number of other organizations—including the administrative offices of the National Council on Alcohol and Drug

Dependence and St. John Eastwood Clinic, a behavioral and substance abuse facility—have moved to the Conner Creek Village campus. SCCI Hospital Detroit, a 53-bed long-term acute care hospital, will come soon. Negotiations with still other prospective tenants—a nursing school, food service training and landscaping schools, adult day care, and child day care services—are in progress.

Meanwhile, St. John Health's leaders will remain focused on their core mission: providing spiritually centered, holistic care that sustains and improves the health of individuals in the communities it serves. They hope that Conner Creek Village will serve as a national model for the revitalization of urban-centered health services, showcasing what a health care system and its community can accomplish by working together. To borrow from a now-familiar proverb: It will take a village to create Conner Creek Village. ■

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JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, March-April 2005
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