

Deeply Affordable Development in Stamford a New Model for Housing

By Liz Skalka

STAMFORD — A new downtown development will provide affordable housing for 125 people who earn less than a third of the area's median income, helping to alleviate the persistent problem of family homelessness in the region.

Inspirica, the largest provider of homeless services in lower Fairfield County, broke ground Monday at 72 Franklin St., a development the nonprofit says is a new kind of venture that will supply "deeply affordable housing" without government subsidies used for construction or rent, helping to keep costs low and the project self-sustaining, officials said.

"Despite its resurgent economy, Stamford continues to experience stubborn homelessness," Inspirica CEO Jason Shaplen said. "This may seem counterintuitive in one of the wealthier areas in the nation."

Most affordable housing is for people earning around half of the median area income, Shaplen said. Deeply affordable housing, aimed at the impoverished or homeless, is for those earning 25 to 35 percent. The median area income determined by the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority is \$142,800 for a family of four in Stamford.

"Seventy-two Franklin ... fills this devastating gap in the spectrum of housing," said Shaplen, who noted the city is part of the nation's fifth-most expensive housing market referred to as the Bridgeport-Norwalk-Stamford metro region.



Inspirica, Inc. CEO Jason Shaplen

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The 47,000-square-foot building will have 26 studio apartments, 17 two-bedroom apartments, 10 three-bedroom apartments and a day care operated by Children's Learning Centers with six classrooms for 48 infants and toddlers.

More than 80 percent of the units will be for those earning less than 30 percent of the area median income. Rents are expected to be \$470 for studios, \$700 for two-bedrooms and \$830 for three-bedrooms, about one third of the market rate. Government vouchers will not be accepted so tenants will be paying rent out of pocket.

The project was funded by private donors, including \$2.5 million from the Freedman family, who operate Garden Homes Management, Stamford-based owners and managers of real estate. The city donated a portion of the land — what had been Stanley Court, a dead end off Franklin — and Inspirica purchased two parcels surrounding it for \$1.7 million. Garden Homes is building a market-rate building behind 72 Franklin St. on a separate parcel.

The self-sustaining development is believed to be one of the few, if not the only one of its kind in the nation, officials said. They hope it will put Stamford ahead of the state and federal goal of eliminating family homelessness by 2020 in a city with a history of welcoming affordable housing developments.

"In some other towns in lower Fairfield County ... our reception would have been frosty," said Richard Freedman, president of Garden Homes and chairman of Stamford's Board of Finance. "But not here, not Stamford. People who live here, people who work in local government here and people who serve in local government here understand that we collectively, as a city, should help those in need."

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Freedman and Shaplen together spearheaded the project, bringing it to city agencies for necessary approvals and securing donors, including the the Edward S. Moore Foundation, First Congregation Church of Greenwich and First County Bank. Stamford developer RMS Companies is building 72 Franklin at cost.

This past spring, in partnership with the city's housing authority, Charter Oak Communities, Inspirica opened a 41,000-square-foot deeply affordable housing development for people 55 and older on Summer Street. It also has deeply affordable housing on Woodland Place. Both sites are government subsidized.

"A safe home is just the foundation," said U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, D-4. "You are taking some of the lowest income people who are placed into the highest cost context and giving them a shot to climb that ladder, through the on-site education, through the proximity to jobs and retail, and that's how you do it. You don't just provide a home — you provide a ladder into the middle class and the American dream."

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