

N. Aurora facility offers disabled young adults their own 'community'

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It's not easy to find Billy Saracco at his new apartment in North Aurora.

After spending most of the past decade in bed at his parent's Hillside home, the 40-year-old former truck driver finally has somewhere else to be.

Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1996, Saracco was wheelchair-bound two years later. With few job opportunities and limited housing options, he was stuck at his parents' house.

That was until Mitch Hamblet opened a suburban sister development to his Eden Supportive Living facility in Chicago at a former Holiday Inn in North Aurora. The new community - as Hamblet likes to call it - is where Saracco works out, eats with neighbors, goes on shopping excursions to nearby stores or just roams around the halls visiting with other newly arrived residents. Anything to stay out of bed.

"I just got a wireless phone because I'm not really in my apartment much and have been missing a lot of calls," Saracco said. "This is basically everything I've been praying to God for."

Opened just a few weeks ago, residents are trickling into the 150-unit complex. It's been a slow process not because there aren't enough takers, but because residents have to be screened by a state agency to determine if they qualify for the state-regulated housing program.

Many of the residents afford the monthly rent of between \$2,850 and \$3,100 through Medicaid or a combination of that and private funds, Eden officials said.

"We're about two-thirds of the way through interviewing everyone on the waiting list and that's been about 90 people," said Julianna Greer, the community's executive director. "We just got our license, too, so we've been getting a lot more referrals."

Mechell Day had been counting down the days when she could move into her new place after spending several months living at her daughter's apartment near the Northern Illinois University campus in DeKalb. She didn't mind that she was first told she could move in May, but finally started unpacking boxes earlier this month.

"Really it was worth the wait," the 49-year-old Chicago native said. "I had been looking around for places and I'd always end up with places where you had to be 65 or older."

Therein lies the solution the Eden communities provide to an increasingly large segment of the disabled population. The complexes are geared toward younger disabled residents. The community serves residents between the ages of 22 and 64. That's because without Eden, most disabled young adults' options are limited to a nursing home or living with their parents.

The community is akin to senior living facilities where the residents are pretty much self-sufficient, but want immediate proximity to a variety of services. Greer said targeting young disabled residents is unique.

"There are people who are in nursing homes who really don't need that much care, but that's all that's available," she said. "The options are limited because of their age."

The Eden property has a restaurant that serves three meals a day to residents with menu options and is included in the rent. There's also a weight room, gym with a full-sized basketball court, theater, library, greenhouse, chapel, hair salon and even a computer room.

"Some of the residents have already volunteered to hold classes to teach other residents who may not know computers too well," Greer said.

Residents also are offered laundry service, grocery shopping, transportation, housekeeping and other tasks as part of the rent.

That's a relief to Day, who is suffering from renal failure and lupus. She said tasks like ironing became hours-long projects when they used to take a few minutes.

"When I got sick about four years ago, I felt so useless and everything I was used to being able to do for myself and my kids was gone," Day said. "You take the little things for granted."

Independence was the main goal for the communities, Hamblet said. More than \$15 million was invested into the North Aurora project, with nearly 40 percent of those costs simply going to accessibility issues.

To provide more space, the units were whittled down from 244 to 150. Most are one-bedroom, but there is a smattering of studio apartments and six two-bedroom units.

Although already fully accessible, the cabinetry can even be adjusted in each unit depending on whether the resident is in a wheelchair.

"We have residents who are going back to college because we're giving them back their freedom by taking away some of their burdens of life," Hamblet said.

Many area disabled housing advocacy groups applaud the Eden project, but officials from those organizations say the state and country have a long way to go.

"It's a small step," said Rahnee Patrick, coordinator of the Chicago chapter of the disabilities rights group ADAPT. "But when will there be policy changes when these young people can live with neighbors who are not disabled too?"

Patrick argues that Medicaid recipients should be able to use the money they are spending on rent at already accessible locations to spend on making housing accessible wherever they want.

ADAPT ranks Illinois in the bottom 10 of the 50 states in terms of access to community services for people with disabilities.

Patty Johnstone leads a support group for parents of children with head injuries called Headstrong for Hope out of Glen Ellyn. She also welcomed the addition of the housing option, but said it doesn't go far enough.

"A lot of these places are classified differently, so it's not something everyone with Medicaid can access," she said.

Eden officials agree that more needs to be done in terms of housing for disabled Illinois residents. That is, after all, why they're in business, Gree said.

"This is not the end all, be all," she said. "I'm the first person to admit that no matter how you are, people want options."

Saracco said it is actually a benefit to be living with other disabled people.

"It's like networking, man," he said. "You find other people who are in your situation and exchange ideas and information. It's nice that I can share stories with people who have gone through some of the same experiences or can help because they've experienced some of the same things."