



Posted on Tue, May. 03, 2011

New KC housing project is geared toward grandfamilies

By LYNN HORSLEY
The Kansas City Star

Ruby Johnson is like a growing number of Kansas City grandmothers, struggling with health problems and living in a run-down rental house while raising a grandchild.

Rose Stigger has endured job loss, foreclosure and multiple moves in recent years as she brings up her 9-year-old granddaughter.

But both women and their grandchildren suddenly feel blessed, thanks to a new housing project devoted to their needs.

"It's a piece of heaven right here on earth," Johnson said as she showed off the pristine, spacious apartment she and her 17-year-old grandson are moving into at Pemberton Park, 5010 Cleveland Ave.

Pemberton Park is the first housing project of its kind in the area and one of a handful across the country. Kansas City Housing Authority officials say it's devoted to "grandfamilies" — families in which grandparents or other relatives 55 and older raise children from their extended families.

"This is a very unique population," said Edwin Lowndes, Housing Authority executive director. "It's a niche market."

Most affordable housing developments cater to seniors only — no children allowed — or to young families, Lowndes said. The family units often pose difficulties for some seniors, with stairs, narrow doors and hallways, and bedrooms on a second floor.

Pemberton Park was designed as a "hybrid" to address the physical and social service needs of both seniors and children, in recognition of the growing trend of families with that generation gap.

The 2000 U.S. census found 4.5 million children under age 18 living in households headed by a grandparent. That number grew to 5.7 million in 2005, and experts say it is almost surely higher now, although 2010 figures aren't yet available.

The 2000 census counted more than 16,100 area households headed by grandparents, with about 63,000 children. The census counted nearly 9,500 households in Jackson County alone; 46 percent of those lived in poverty.

"It's a growing need," said JoAnn Stovall, program coordinator with the Family Friends Program, a grandparent/relative caregiver support service based at Children's Mercy Hospital. "It's not like it's going away."

Stovall said grandparents or senior relatives most commonly step in as caregivers if an adult child has substance abuse problems. Mental illness, death of the adult child or other difficulties also can thrust the grandparent into a caregiver role.

Family Friends conducts grandparent support groups throughout the area, providing participants with guidance and links to community resources. But until now, it did not have housing options specifically for that demographic.

The idea for Kansas City housing tailored to grandfamilies originated several years ago with Brian Collins, senior associate with Cougar Capital, a Parkville-based developer of affordable housing.

Collins had heard about a project that opened in 2005 in New York's Bronx and thought the idea would work in Kansas City. Similar projects have been developed in Boston; Chicago; Detroit; Hartford, Conn.; Phoenix; and Baton Rouge, La.

CBS News recently profiled the Bronx project and found a haven for 50 low-income families — a "village of grandmas" raising kids.

Collins and others visited the Bronx development to learn about its architectural design characteristics and social

service and youth programs.

Lowndes said a nonprofit affiliate of the Housing Authority agreed to be a partner in the project and scouted locations. Housing Authority officials realized they had land adjacent to the Pemberton Heights senior housing development at 51st Street and Cleveland. The land is on a bus line, not far from schools, day care facilities, a community center, Swope Health Services and the Shops at Blue Parkway.

"It was under our noses. It was perfect," said John Monroe, director of planning and development for the Housing Authority.

Cougar Capital applied for tax credits in 2008 and won them, but then the financial market for tax credits collapsed. Eventually the project was financed with \$7.3 million in federal tax credit replacement funds and \$435,000 in private investment.

Pemberton Park has 36 apartments in two buildings with a grandparents lounge, playground, community room, computer lab, and arts and crafts room.

Family Friends will continue to support the grandparents, and Phoenix Family Housing, which serves low-income housing communities, will provide on-site educational and social support programs.

Stigger and her granddaughter, Inesha Williams, already have moved in. Their two-bedroom apartment is cozy and spotless.

Stigger has been raising Inesha since 2006. They've moved five times in less than four years as Stigger coped with the loss of two jobs and a foreclosure. She and Inesha most recently lived in a rental house with many steps and a yard filled with snakes.

She first heard about plans for Pemberton Park several years ago and is thrilled it's finally a reality.

"It's something I've been dreaming about," she said as she gazed around her living room and kitchen.

Inesha said she's eager to use the computer lab for her homework. She also likes having her own bedroom.

"I like the walk-in closets," she said.

Stigger can't wait to unpack her boxes and bags.

"Once we get all this done, it will be home. It's a fresh start."

Johnson, 60, has been raising her grandson Curtis since he was a baby.

Now he's a junior at the Southwest Early College Campus. They can stay in their grandfamily unit until Curtis turns 21.

They've lived for six years in an old rental house with the laundry in the basement. Johnson said she can't navigate the stairs after surgeries for a brain aneurysm and knee replacement.

Her new unit is all on one level. The laundry room is right off the kitchen, which opens onto a large living room and then the bedrooms. Her own bedroom has a bathroom with a step-in shower (much easier than a bathtub). Another bedroom will house her medical equipment, scooter or wheelchair, and oxygen.

"Look here. Isn't it gorgeous?" she said as she showed off the new appliances and kitchen cabinets. "I've never had anything like this."

The complex is managed by Yarco Companies, which is taking applications and expects to fill the units within a few months.

To be eligible, families must make no more than 60 percent of area median income, based on family size.

The units are priced from \$525 for a two-bedroom unit to \$775 for a four-bedroom. But many eligible families already have Section 8 vouchers or can apply for them, allowing them to pay 30 percent of their adjusted income.

Lowndes said the Housing Authority has dozens of families on its Section 8 waiting list who meet Pemberton Park's eligibility criteria. Stovall, of the Family Friends program, hopes it can serve as a model for projects in Wyandotte, Johnson, Clay and Platte counties.

"We need more," she said. "I would like to see it around the nation."

Pemberton Park

•Address: 5010 Cleveland Ave.

•**Housing:** 36 apartments with two, three or four bedrooms

•**Eligibility:** Grandparents or relative caregivers 55 or older. Must have legal guardianship of children up to age 18. Income limitations apply. Section 8 vouchers available.

•**More information:** 816-921-7275 or [www. liveatpembertonpark. com](http://www.liveatpembertonpark.com)

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