As more and more developers seek to build communities that improve health and wellness and address the social determinants of health, knowing how best to take action can be daunting. Some housing providers are embarking on the Enterprise Green Communities Criteria Health Action Plan process to prioritize and select the cost-effective design features and strategies that will drive health and well-being for residents.

In 2021, Volunteers of America National Services worked with an urban planning and public health expert to develop a Health Action Plan (HAP) for a new development in Colorado Springs.

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Prioritizing Health in Affordable Housing

Volunteers of America National Services (VOANS) is a nonprofit, faith-based organization dedicated to helping those in need transform their lives. To date, VOANS has created 1,500 homes for seniors, families, veterans, and persons with disabilities in Colorado. For VOANS, creating a Health Action Plan was a no-brainer. The integration of health and housing is a priority at VOANS. At the same time, the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority (CHFA) has been encouraging developers to thoughtfully incorporate community input and health-promoting services and supports in LIHTC-financed developments. This made the timing right for VOANS to embark on a comprehensive Health Action Plan for Paloma Garden, an affordable housing senior development in southeast Colorado Springs. Paloma Garden will be a new 127-unit community comprised of two properties – the existing 51-unit Laurel Gardens community, which will undergo renovation, and 76 new units to be built on an adjacent property connected by a shared outdoor community space and gardens. Well before the planning for Paloma Garden began, VOANS had already worked with environmental and public health practitioners during the integrative design process for other projects in the past (see page 2). Through these networks, VOANS was able to connect with a public health consultant with expertise in community development and design to help them create a Health Action Plan for Paloma Garden.

Paloma Garden, a VOANS Community

Location: Colorado Springs, CO
Expected Completion Date: 2024
Includes:
- Renovation of the existing 51-unit Laurel Gardens property
- New 3-story building of approximately 76 residential units for seniors, aged 62 & up
- 127 units in total across existing and new buildings.

Proposed health-promoting features:
- Energy efficiency system upgrades
- Spaces that incorporate light, greenery, and other natural elements to create a tranquil, healing environment
- Onsite health suite
- Walking paths and community gardens

Gathering Community Input

For Paloma Garden, VOANS gathered resident feedback through a survey, followed by a virtual meeting where current residents of Laurel Gardens discussed their concerns and desires regarding the redevelopment. Community stakeholders representing healthcare, the City, senior services, and other local groups were also interviewed. The development team ultimately received letters of support for the project from eleven different local nonprofits and elected representatives.

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DEVELOPER EXPERIENCE

“Having a resource like the Health Action Plan provided a way for us to share a vision of how we are working with the community at Paloma Garden to create healthier housing. It has been useful as we have conversations with new healthcare partners.”
- Brian Reilly, Development Director

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE HOUSING

VOANS had already leveraged local data and engaged with public health and healthcare stakeholders to assess resident and community needs for two other development projects in Colorado. As recipients of a Colorado Housing Finance Authority’s Colorado Healthy Housing loan for their Miremonte property in Durango, VOANS worked with an environmental consultant to catalog health-promoting resources available in the community and to develop a health implementation plan to drive design and services. Through this process, VOANS created a healthier affordable rental housing development serving seniors in Durango. The award-winning property is located just blocks from a regional medical center and a nature preserve, and includes one EV charging station open to residents and the public.

During the integrative design process for their Cadence property in Fort Collins, which occurred during Colorado’s historic 2020 wildfire season, poor air quality emerged as a health equity issue. VOANS is now working with Group 14 Engineering to create an affordable housing community for older adults, aged 55 and older, built to Enterprise Green Communities 2020 Criteria, Zero Energy Homes, and WELL Building standards. The process of authentically engaging with and listening to each community’s wants and needs for both developments primed VOA for the work that would be required to complete a HAP for Paloma Garden.

While rich in cultural assets and surrounded by natural beauty, stakeholders identified a number of challenges in Southeast Colorado Springs that were of concern:
- Insufficient affordable housing
- Limited walkability & health options
- Shortage of mental health services
- Ongoing stress & social isolation during COVID
- Poor air quality & extreme heat exposure during climate-related events, such as wildfires and drought

Through this feedback, VOANS and their public health consultant cataloged a range of evidence-based strategies that could be incorporated into Paloma Garden to address some of the above concerns – and to ultimately build a better home. Some of these strategies, such as the creation of an onsite health suite, will be implemented with philanthropic dollars VOANS was able to secure through the Colorado Health Foundation.

Benefits of Completing a Health Action Plan

As state financing agencies seek LIHTC applicants with a demonstrated understanding of resident and community needs and an intention to incorporate green and healthy living features, a HAP can demonstrate a developer’s commitment to doing this in a thoughtful and impactful way. As evinced by the additional foundation funds secured by VOANS, a Health Action Plan can attract health-focused funders and philanthropy, who can provide funds to support a coordinated system of resident services. The Health Action Plan process can also strengthen developers’ connections with organizations and community groups fundamental to the surrounding neighborhood.

About Health Action Plans:

Rooted in public health assessment methods such as Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) and the Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) process, the Health Action Plan process requires affordable housing developers to work with public health experts to prioritize resident and community health needs through data analysis and community engagement. The public health expert and developer gather and review local data, including publicly available health and demographic data, to understand both historic and current community conditions and engage with local stakeholders to identify key factors that affect community health.

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