

See Call for Entries for program rules and guidelines.

Special Needs Housing: Housing for Persons with Special Needs
MassHousing – Treehouse at Easthampton Meadow

Easthampton, Massachusetts, located in the Connecticut River valley of western Massachusetts, is a quintessential New England town. It has evolved from a rural farming village, to a mill town and now to a vibrant and diverse community with residential, cultural and recreational opportunities. It is the setting for one of the most unique affordable rental communities with which MassHousing has been involved – Treehouse at Easthampton Meadow.

Financed by MassHousing in 2005, Treehouse at Easthampton Meadow is a 60-unit mixed-income development designed to meet the needs of some of our most vulnerable citizens – children in foster care and senior citizens. This new neighborhood provides a multi-generational approach to support adoptive families of foster children as well as elders who wish to serve as neighborhood partners.

This unique approach to provide enduring family relationships and supportive community connections for children in foster care was the vision of the Treehouse Foundation which was founded in 2002 to develop new options for caring for children in foster care in America. Thousands of youth are “aged out” of foster care annually with no enduring family or community relationships and, as a result, are at risk for homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, teen pregnancy, poverty and mental illness. And, many of those among us with the most life experience and available time – our elders – are often isolated in elderly housing developments. Treehouse at Easthampton Meadow creates a community where foster children, their permanent adoptive families and seniors can live together and care for one another.

Treehouse at Easthampton Meadow offers 48 affordable one-bedroom cottages for seniors, and 12 three, four and five bedroom family townhouse units (six market and six affordable). Separate and apart from the rental development, 42 newly constructed ownership units will be developed, which, in combination with the rental units is intended to create a “rural village.” The design of the neighborhood resembles a traditional village center with walkways, play areas, friendly front porches and lots of room to run and grow for community members of all ages.

The development incorporates a variety of smart growth principles including open space preservation, cluster development, conservation of natural resources, creation of walkable neighborhoods and utilization of existing infrastructure. Together the rental and ownership components of this multi-element development comprise 46.8 acres.

Treehouse at Easthampton Meadow provides and coordinates a wide array of support services and community amenities in furtherance of its goal to create a cooperative intergenerational community. Some of these amenities include a 4,000 square foot community center providing space for on-site management, family and senior recreational programs, a community kitchen and dining area for weekly potlucks, daycare space, a computer library and homework center, as well as walking/jogging trails and open space areas.

Staffing includes an on-site administrator, social worker and therapist. A wide variety of mentoring and support programs for children and their families as well as programs for seniors are provided on site in coordination with the Berkshire Center for Families and Children, local Councils on Aging, and Hampshire Community Action Commission's Senior Volunteer Program.

The Challenge:

Since the Treehouse Foundation had no prior affordable housing development experience, the foundation's board partnered with Beacon Communities, LLC, an experienced for-profit real estate development and management company that provided their development services on a reduced-fee basis. Their vision for the development was an ambitious one: construct a mixed-income rental housing community for families who have adopted children in foster care and elders who want to serve in a supporting role as "honorary grandparents" and "caring neighbors" to the children and their families.

Perhaps the most daunting challenge for the Treehouse/Beacon team was securing the many public subsidies that would be needed to develop this new approach to foster care. The project would require a substantial investment of public funds from a variety of housing programs including state and federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits, HOME, Section 8 project-based subsidies, state Affordable Housing Trust funds, as well as MassHousing's Priority Development Fund. For MassHousing and the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community (DHCD), the overriding concern was obvious – this was a very innovative, but untested, housing model. Would families with children in foster/adoptive care and elders choose to move to this new community?

After securing the strong endorsement of the proposal from a number of local and regional social services agencies and the state Department of Social Services, MassHousing and DHCD committed the necessary financial resources in 2005. In total more than \$13 million in state and federal equity was provided – including \$1.7 million interest-free non-amortizing loan from MassHousing's Priority Development Fund. In addition MassHousing provided a \$737,000 first mortgage loan.

The Result:

After two years of operations, the Treehouse community is widely viewed as a great success. It is fully rented with 102 people living in the community, with residents' ages ranging from 1 to 85 years. A total of 12 families are providing permanent homes for children who have experienced foster care and 52 elders are living in the 48 one-story cottages. The Treehouse Foundation's vision that children, families and elders can live together in an economically and culturally diverse and supportive community has been realized.

The children of the community are benefiting from the mentoring and support they are receiving from their elderly neighbors. All residents have access to a variety of social services provided by community based agencies as well as an innovative animal therapy program, community garden, health and well-being project, educational arts program and internships. Most importantly the development provides permanent parenting and community relationships for children who have

experienced “the bounce” of foster care – a series of temporary homes, schools, and relationships.

MassHousing believes strongly that safe, decent and affordable housing can change lives. With a development like the Treehouse, the life changing aspects for all the residents – young and old alike – are evident every day.