

## **2008 NCSHA Awards**

### **Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority**

#### **Special Needs Housing/Combating Homelessness: Prairie Apartments**

**Background:** Beginning in 2006, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel started running a series of investigative reports on abominable quality of housing options for people who were homeless or mentally ill. Stories of people living in infested, nearly-condemned homes surfaced. A task force of representatives from the city, Milwaukee County, State of Wisconsin and housing advocates was formed to examine the problem. The Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority put its own resources to the task, recruiting skilled developers with experience working with the homeless.

In 2007, three projects were awarded low-income housing tax credits, totaling \$11 million. One of those projects was Prairie Apartments, a joint venture between the non-profit Guest House of Milwaukee, a homeless shelter for adult men, and Heartland Housing out of Chicago.

As with any low income housing tax credit project built in Milwaukee, Prairie Apartments would be required to have an emerging business component, utilizing the area's emerging businesses to perform and contract work on the project. Many of the tax credit projects in Milwaukee have also added a workforce development piece, with developers hiring people from the low-income neighborhoods where they are building. For Guest House and Heartland Housing, it seemed only natural to hire a workforce from their existing residents.

#### **Project Description:**

The building formerly at 1218 Highland Avenue was once an addiction recovery center that had since been abandoned. Run down and dilapidated, the partnership of Guest House and Heartland Housing determined that site would be ideal for their new venture, which is just around the corner from the Guest House's facility. Guest House is a Milwaukee social service agency that provides shelter for 70 to 80 men each night.

The 24-unit project will not only house homeless adults struggling with mental illness or substance abuse. Heartland Housing will provide an on-site resident manager and a part-time counselor and case manager.

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The development received a \$4 million low income housing tax credit allocation from WHEDA in 2007, and in the spring of 2008, demolition of the existing structure began. In keeping with WHEDA's Emerging Business Program's requirements, Heartland Housing has committed to 30% emerging business contractors to work on the project, exceeding WHEDA's goal of 25%.

As WHEDA was working to further grow our workforce development component, we realized we had the perfect opportunity to diversify an already diverse program, using residents of Guest House as tradesmen on the project. WHEDA worked with community partners, including local job training organization Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership/BIG STEP to hold four project and job information sessions at The Guest House, with more than 50 residents in attendance. During the sessions residents received information on job training skills, trades training, placement, and interviewing. At the final session all residents that had been accessed were invited back to interview with the general contractor and all subcontractors working on Prairie Apartments.

**Results:**

To date, 11 current and former residents of the Guest House have been trained in the electrical, plumbing, flooring, roofing, and masonry trades and either working on site or working with their new employer on other sites prior to starting work on Prairie. Following a job skill assessment, WHEDA worked with Big Step, a job training organization and VJS, the project's general contractor, to identify a group of candidates deemed suitable for immediate training and placement. Those who required further steps to get through the training component are currently going through a skills assessment and improvement program.

In addition, two of the participants have been placed on other WHEDA projects and still others utilized the Big Step manufacturing training component to secure other job opportunities in the manufacturing industries. The goal is for each of the 18 contractors on the project to hire one Guest House resident.