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In the Bronx, an Apartment House Designed for Grandparent Families

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By Michael Anft

Not long after watching elderly women attempt to corral young children on the New York subway, David Taylor decided it was time for his charity to get into the subsidized-housing business.

As executive director of Presbyterian Senior Services, in New York, Mr. Taylor was already well aware that many elderly people were living in overcrowded, crime-ridden, and vermin-infested houses in the Bronx, where his organization serves destitute people in one of the five poorest Congressional districts in the United States.

A program run by the charity since 1995 has helped hundreds of the 18,000 Bronx grandparents who deal with the emotional and financial stress of raising grandchildren in lieu of parents who are unable to care for them.

But a few years ago, Mr. Taylor could see the strain in the faces of grandmothers as they headed home after support-group sessions to dilapidated tenements and public housing, much of it controlled by gangs.

He saw that look again among women on the subway and resolved to do something about it.

So, four years ago, along with the New York Housing Authority and a group called the West Side Federation for Senior and Supportive Housing, also in New York, Mr. Taylor oversaw the design of 50 homes the organizations built for women who had taken charge of raising their children's children. He garnered money from private sources and obtained tax credits and loans to finance the effort.

The GrandParent Family Apartments now serve grandparents with an average annual income around \$10,000; its residents care for 93 children. Grandparents pay 30 percent of their annual income in rent.

"We were the first organization in the country to go out and build a brand-new building to our specs, which were based on what grandparents need to raise families," says Mr.

Taylor. Toward that end, the building's developers had halls built wide enough to accommodate elderly women pushing walkers past playing children.

Laundry rooms are on each floor, and security guards work at a front desk 24 hours a day. Housing for custodial grandparents has failed in other cities because the sons and daughters of the residents — often people who have had drug problems or have served jail time — have moved in and caused problems for other family members, or because some residents of the homes have become victims of crime.

"It was important that we dealt with the security issue upfront," says Mr. Taylor.

Serving Young and Old

The project solves several problems for custodial grandparents. Children often aren't allowed into subsidized housing for the elderly, causing serious problems for grandparents who are poor.

In some states, grandparents without legal custody do not always qualify as "family," meaning they cannot meet requirements that would allow them to obtain government help in paying the rent. Organizations that have tried to open housing for older people that would include grandchildren have sometimes been stymied because of those rules.

"Overnight, a grandparent might have to take in five kids," says Susan J. Kelley, founder of Project Healthy Grandparents, in Atlanta. "What if there's no room for them? If they're already living in senior housing, they may have to move out."

Fears over the inadequacy of their housing help keep low-income custodial grandparents from seeking support when they need it.

"Many of these families go without government help," says Diane DePanfilis, a professor of social work at the University of Maryland at Baltimore and an adviser to Grandparent Family Connections, a program in Baltimore that serves 125 families.

"A lot of them worry that, because they live in poor conditions, they might not be able to keep the kids if someone from an agency saw where they live," she adds.

The GrandParent Family Apartments give people a chance to live openly with their grandchildren, while taking advantage of a wide array of services.

Those services include logistical help, mental-health care, legal assistance, parenting classes, and support groups, and provide homework help, tutoring, and counseling for some of the children who reside in the apartment complex.

"We're especially proud that 100 percent of our kids were promoted in school last year," Mr. Taylor says.

The project has been successful enough to garner attention from organizations in Australia, Germany, New Zealand, and South Korea, and from representatives of American cities, including Baltimore and Kansas City, Mo.

In November, a similar project opened in Detroit, with help from \$4.8-million in loans and tax credits from that city's Local Initiatives Support Corporation.

But such support isn't often forthcoming from grant makers, Mr. Taylor says.

"I've been turned down by foundations a lot," he says. "Not too many people want to deal with the South Bronx. Funders need to branch out and serve families as a whole, and not just children."

He says he knows how he would spend the money if it became available.

"We've done housing, but one of the things the professionals see is that the psychiatric problems of our people run very deep," he says. "The support groups provide a great service, but our people need much more."