

New Bonnie Lane housing complex helps fit the needs of physically disabled Las Vegas seniors

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The Bonnie Lane Elder Housing Apartments, a new senior housing complex at 2047 Bonnie Lane, was built by a company that has its roots in tragedy — and overcoming the challenges presented by that tragedy. Dan Billmark, director of real estate development for the Minnesota-based Accessible Space Inc., told how ASI was formed at the opening ceremony for the apartments on April 1.

“Most of you have heard this story over and over and over again,” Billmark said. “But it really speaks to the essence of why (the company was founded) and who we are, and I like to telling it, so you’re going to get to hear it again.”

The company has its roots in the friendship of three students attending Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., in the early 1970s: Michael Pesch, Charles Berg and Stephen Wiggins. Pesch was severely injured in a shallow water diving incident and was left a quadriplegic.

“After a year of rehab, the time had come for him to move away from the hospital to a place where he could have some semblance of his former independence,” Billmark said. “In 1976, there were no alternatives for someone living with a severe disability other than living in a nursing home or with a family member.”

Pesch’s friends, Berg and Wiggins, made solving the problem their senior college thesis. They graduated with honors in 1978 and incorporated ASI the same year to create affordable accessible housing. The company now has projects in 31 states.

The new apartments, built in coordination with Clark County, will provide affordable housing and allow seniors to live with independence and dignity in a secure and supportive environment.

“The apartments have so many amenities and improvements, including things that I haven’t seen before,” said Clark County Commissioner Marilyn Kirkpatrick. “I hope we can implement some of these improvements to other facilities in the county. Folks that live (at the apartments) will also have the benefit of access to the Cora Coleman Senior Center across the street.”

The building includes 14 wheelchair-accessible apartment units with custom-designed, oversized wheel-in showers, roll-under counters and cooktops, touch-activated faucets, power-assist entry doors, accessible washers and dryers, and adjustable closet shelves, among other amenities designed to serve the wheelchair-bound.

County officials pointed out that the facility is also near Bob Price Recreation Center and the recently completed Bob Price Trail and is close to grocery stores, pharmacies, banks, restaurants and places of worship.

The facility fills several needs in the county’s housing plan. All 65 income-restricted units in Bonnie Lane are fully leased by households at below 50 percent of the area median income, which is \$21,500 for a one-person household.

County officials noted that there is still a severe shortfall of housing for special needs and physically disabled individuals. There are 180,266 persons with special needs within the plan's boundaries and a supply of 63,549 units specially designed to meet their needs. For the physically disabled, there are only 3,500 units available for 36,769 people.

All of the apartments are also designed for the hearing and visually impaired. Push-plate, power-assisted doors, accessible trash rooms with pneumatic trash chutes, accessible public restrooms, a wheelchair-accessible computer room and an accessible community room with an entertainment center and kitchen are all designed to make the physically disabled feel their needs are considered first and not as an afterthought or a poorly functioning retrofit, officials added.

Although the facility had its grand opening and open house in April, it has been open and operating for nearly a year. Its first resident, Guy Cornell, moved in in July, and he marveled at the look and comfort of his new home.

"I've never lived in a place that was both nice and brand new," Cornell said. "Nobody has walked on my carpet, except the builders. No one has slept in my bedroom but me. Most importantly, nobody has used my bathroom but me."

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