

DEVELOPMENTS

Inclusive Futures: New Developments Serve Adults With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

By Donna Kimura · Sep 9, 2026 7:50am

Affordable Housing

Developments



A large pool and other community spaces that encourage resident engagement are key features of The Village of Casa Familia. (Courtesy Atlantic Pacific Cos.)

More than a decade ago, Marie-Ilene Whitehurst and Karin Jawitz gathered around a kitchen table with a shared concern: What would happen to their children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) when they could no longer care for them?

That conversation sparked a movement. Joined by six other families, the mothers founded Casa Familia, a Miami-based nonprofit focused on expanding housing opportunities for adults with IDD.

“Our dream came from the passion, the worry, and the fear we all had for our adult children,” says Whitehurst, whose 34-year-old son, Thomas, has autism.

Their concerns underscore a broader challenge: About 8 million people in the United States, including an estimated 337,000 in Florida, have an intellectual or developmental disability. About 75% of adults with IDD live with a parent or guardian, leaving many families facing an uncertain future as caregivers age and accessible, long-term housing options remain limited.



The Village of Casa Familia features 50 affordable units for residents with IDD. (Courtesy Atlantic Pacific Cos.)

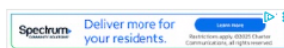
September 2026

PRINT & ONLINE | Affordable Housing Finance Magazine | Donna Kimura

Distribution: 35,000 | Approximate Visitors Per Month: 40,482

Casa Familia supporters understood the need and even knew what they wanted—an inclusive development that provides opportunities for social interaction along with supportive services. But affordable housing doesn't get built on good intentions alone.

After years of effort, their plans eventually gained needed traction when the families met Marc Plonskier, co-founder and president of The Gatehouse Group, a Boston-based developer of affordable housing.



"If you meet them, you'll end up working for Casa Familia. That's what happened to me," he says with the enthusiasm of a convert. Plonskier became board chairman as the organization grew beyond just family members to include key professionals and local leaders. He remains involved as chair of the nonprofit's real estate committee and the in-house development expert.

The group's plans gained further momentum when Miami-Dade County provided a lease for 9 acres of land.

Fast-forward to today, about a decade after the kitchen-table conversation. The Village of Casa Familia in Miami-Dade County has opened and is fully occupied, with the next phase on the way.



Casa Familia co-founders Karin Jawitz (left) and Marie-Ilene Whitehurst and others are part of the effort to create housing for the IDD community. (M11 Studios)

Co-developed by Casa Familia and Atlantic Pacific Cos., the 50-unit development has a preference for residents with IDD and is home to a wide range of residents, including those with autism, fragile X syndrome, and cerebral palsy.

Even for Plonskier, who has developed thousands of affordable housing units, the new community is unlike any other that he has built. For example, people with autism are often sensitive to noise, so The Village of Casa Familia includes an extra layer of soundproofing between apartments.

It is also common for multifamily housing to have double-loaded hallways with residences on both sides, but that's not the case at this development. Instead, apartments open to see the pool or other community features to provide clear sightlines and encourage

socialization.

At 11,000 square feet, the community building is also dramatically larger than other developments of its size. A 50-unit property would ordinarily have about 1,200 square feet of community space.

Designed by Corwil Architects, The Village of Casa Familia is loaded with amenities, including a popular fitness center, a quiet room where residents can relax, a movie room, a game room, an art studio, an internet café, and a cafeteria.

The extensive opportunities for social engagement are one way it stands out from other developments. In addition, Sunrise Community provides key social services that aim to help residents build skills, stay active, and connect with others. They include life-skills development, culinary, fitness, and self-advocacy programs.

"It's a larger and more comprehensive development than anything we've built before," says Ken Naylor, president of development at Atlantic Pacific Cos., noting that the one- and two-bedroom apartments are also bigger than typical units. The larger apartments are helpful for residents who have aides that come and assist them. The apartments are also seen as people's "forever homes," so the team wanted them to be as comfortable as possible.

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Inside the Deal

A strong blend of financing and policies was required to develop The Village of Casa Familia.

The \$42 million project is funded with low-income housing tax credits (LIHTCs) awarded by Florida Housing Finance Corp., which has seen interest in developing housing for residents with IDD steadily grow, especially larger permanent supportive housing (PSH) projects.

The state's qualified allocation plan for awarding LIHTCs calls for 5% of the overall allocation authority to be reserved for projects that target persons who have a disabling condition, including individuals with IDD.

Since 2013, Florida Housing has issued at least two annual requests for applications to help finance supportive housing developments for residents with IDD.

PSH developments for persons with IDD that are financed with 9% LIHTCs are eligible to receive a state-designated housing credit basis boost. In addition, these applicants are eligible for a 21% developer fee, which is 5% higher than fees for general occupancy rental developments. The additional 5% developer fee is placed in an operating deficit reserve account to support the sustainability of the development, explain agency officials.

Nonprofit organizations are also eligible to apply for a Florida Housing predevelopment loan of up to \$750,000. The funds may be used for predevelopment activities, including purchasing land, conducting feasibility analysis, and paying local government, engineering, and architect fees. Eligible applicants also receive technical assistance to formalize a development plan and prepare for accessing permanent financing.

For The Village of Casa Familia, Florida Housing, along with its technical assistance provider for the predevelopment loan program, helped the development team navigate the planning and financing process. In conjunction with technical support, it awarded \$1.5 million in 9% LIHTCs and about \$9.7 million in other funding, including a state IDD grant, a National Housing Trust Fund (NHTF) grant, and loans.

Truist Community Capital provided the LIHTC equity and a construction loan to make the deal happen. Other financing partners include Miami-Dade County Housing and Community Development, Miami-Dade County Community Services Department, and the Florida Department of Commerce. The new development is a model for other projects going forward.

Naylor and others also point to how eye-opening it has been to see the severe need for housing for the population. That reality became clear when 2,000 initial applications poured in for one of the apartments at the new development.

"The need is desperate," Naylor says, while noting the extensive support that came from funding partners and others. "There is a lot of will to find a solution."

With more work to be done, Casa Familia is continuing to build on its campus. The nonprofit, in partnership with Pinnacle, is developing The Gardens at Casa Familia, which will add another 50 units this year.

It is also building a smaller group of homes that will provide assisted living for 24 residents with higher needs. Whitehurst is hopeful that her son will be a future resident of this phase.

"What we always envisioned was this big community of adults living their best life, going out into the community, being part of society," she says.

The Casa Familia mothers and fathers have always been the special sauce behind the project. Their grit was as essential as Plonskier's and Naylor's development expertise. For them, watching families move into the community has been especially rewarding.

"It has given people peace of mind," Whitehurst says. "Every parent with a child with special needs worries about their future. You want to make sure who's going to take care of them and who's going to be there for them."

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The Grove at Cottonwood

About 2,000 miles away in Broomfield, Colorado, residents began moving into The Grove at Cottonwood in August. The new 40-unit neuro-inclusive community with a preference for adults with IDD is the first affordable housing development of its kind in the area, but the human story sounds a lot like the one in Florida.

"There is a great need for affordable housing designed for an IDD population. We've heard from a number of caregivers who have adult children living with them, and those caregivers are concerned about their future and the future of their kids and how they can thrive independently," says Gabrielle Carazo, senior development manager at BlueLine Development.



The Grove at Cottonwood in Broomfield, Colorado, provides 40 permanent affordable rental homes centered around accessibility and inclusion. (Matthew Staver)

The parents and self-advocates began working with the Broomfield Housing Alliance (BHA) several years ago to explore housing opportunities for the IDD community. It led BHA, the local public housing authority, to join forces with BlueLine Development, an experienced affordable housing developer, to co-develop the new property.

The team held several design charrettes with members of the IDD community to better understand the elements that would be critical in the development. Through these meetings, the developers heard about the importance of including areas for residents to connect.

Designed by Caddis Collaborative, The Grove at Cottonwood features three buildings of varying heights that blend seamlessly into the surrounding community. A two-story "common house" includes a community kitchen, a game room, a central mail area, and a resident services coordinator's office. Although it is connected to one of the residential buildings, it does not abut any of the apartments to be mindful of residents who may be sensitive to noise.

At the community meetings, the development team also learned about the importance of personal choice for the residents, which led to features like dimmable lights in the apartments.

Carazo notes that The Grove at Cottonwood is also different from other permanent supportive housing developments that typically have dedicated on-site staff for mental and behavioral services like case management.

"Members of the IDD community are often engaged with their own provider agencies so we wanted to ensure our residents maintain those critical relationships and continuity of care while also having the flexibility of choice," she says. As a result, residents will maintain their existing coordinated care, but there will also be a resident services coordinator on-site to provide community programming and resource navigation.

The project leaders took another unique step to ensure connections to service providers by partnering with FRIENDS of Broomfield and Imagine!, two organizations that serve the IDD community. Both organizations are also referral agencies for The Grove at Cottonwood.

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FRIENDS of Broomfield has developed an Independent Living Academy that provides a 12-month curriculum to interested participants preparing and supporting them with the transition from a caregiver housing model to independent living. Classes cover topics such as budget planning/finances, apartment living how-tos, safety skills, filling out housing applications, and understanding leases. There is also a co-occurring curriculum for caregivers providing information of how to best support their participant through this journey.

The \$22 million development was financed primarily through 9% federal and state LIHTCs awarded by the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority with equity from RBC Community Investments. The Colorado Division of Housing (DOH) provided NHTF money. Other partners include the Boulder and Broomfield Housing Consortium, Impact Development Fund, and Hilltop Bank. The project includes 10 Section 811 vouchers administered by DOH.

"The Grove at Cottonwood is about meeting people where they are in life," Carazo says. "From the beginning, the project team prioritized engaging with future potential residents to better understand their needs to ensure the creation of a community that supports independent living, where they can thrive. As a result, the residents will be able to see themselves reflected in the place they call home."

Connection Angle Lake



Developed by Mercy Housing Northwest, Connection Angle Lake brings new housing opportunities to people with IDD in SeaTac, Washington. (Courtesy Mercy Housing)

About a year ago, Mercy Housing Northwest opened Connection Angle Lake in SeaTac, Washington. The development features 130 affordable homes, including 26 units that serve residents who have IDD.

The Arc of King County, an organization that serves the IDD community, has relocated its offices to the ground floor of the new building.

"The project from day one was a partnership with The Arc of King County," says Colin Morgan-Cross, acting president of Mercy Housing Northwest. "They partnered with us not only to serve people in the housing but to create a new headquarters and a new service hub for their staff who serve people with IDD throughout the county."

The veteran affordable housing developer describes Connection Angle Lake as "an integrated living environment that is designed to be an inclusive community with deeply affordable apartments for people with IDD alongside other households earning up to 60% of the area median income."

The new development opened a few years after a report prepared for the state Department of Social and Health Services estimated there were more than 37,000 adults with IDD in Washington facing housing insecurity.

The study also found that housing production specifically for adults with IDD had declined in recent years. Developers built roughly 28 units per year for adults with IDD during the last decade—down from an annual average of 57 and 54 units during the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. These modest numbers were already insufficient to meet the demand, but the downward trend is troubling, according to the report.

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That makes developments like Connection Angle Lake all the more significant.

"We have made a commitment over the last few years to engage with the community on a deeper level in designing building and programs," says Morgan-Cross, explaining that meetings were held with members of the disabled community, which led to additional accessibility and adaptability features being added at the SeaTac community.

Multifamily housing developments are designed years before knowing who will be moving in and their abilities, so the development team emphasized adaptability to create a place that could be responsive to different residents. One example is prewiring unit doors to have an automatic opener if that's needed by a resident. Prewiring this feature is much easier and less expensive than it is to do once a building is completed, explains Morgan-Cross.

In another move, The Arc of King County staff led trainings with Mercy Housing building staff to help them strengthen capacity in serving people with disabilities living at the property.

Connection Angle Lake is built on a site that Sound Transit, the regional transit authority, deemed surplus land and committed for affordable housing. As a result, Mercy Housing Northwest was able to obtain the site at a heavily discounted price. It also means that Connection Angle Lake is next to a light-rail station, giving residents easy access to jobs, schools, and services.

The combined cost of the housing and the Arc Legacy Center was approximately \$74 million. Financing partners include the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, Washington State Department of Commerce, King County Office of Housing and Community Development, National Equity Fund, J.P. Morgan, Amazon Housing Equity Fund, and Mercy Housing. The building was designed by Runberg Architecture Group and built by Walsh Construction.

The Village of Casa Familia, The Grove at Cottonwood, and Connection Angle Lake won't solve the nationwide shortage of housing for adults with IDD. But, they show what's possible when families, developers, housing agencies, and service providers come together around a shared goal.

For parents like Whitehurst, that means something more profound than new apartments. It means knowing their children can have a home, a community, and opportunities.

<https://www.housingfinance.com/developments/inclusive-futures-new-developments-serve-adults-intellectual-and-developmental>