

Bronx Project Sees Health in Affordable Housing

Complex is designed to address many of the hurdles facing low-income residents

By

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July 10, 2016 7:29 p.m. ET

A 150-year-old health-care institution in the Bronx has a new prescription for wellness that starts with affordable housing.

SBH Health System, which includes St. Barnabas Hospital, has joined with developers L+M Development Partners and Hornig Capital Partners LLC to create a 450,000-square-foot complex designed to address many of the hurdles to healthy living facing low-income residents in the Bronx.

The project, located on two parcels across the street from SBH's medical center, will have 314 units, all of them affordable apartments for low-income or formerly homeless households with services such as an ambulatory-care center and a kitchen for teaching healthful recipes.

"If you have a safe place to live, if you have good food, then you can start to think about all those other things that relate to wellness," said David Perlstein, chief executive of SBH Health System.

The \$156 million development reflects the broader push in health care to focus on preventive strategies, integrate the way services are delivered as well as cut down on expensive and unnecessary hospitalizations or emergency-room visits.

New York state has set an ambitious agenda to revamp its Medicaid system and encourage providers to come up with ways to cut costs and boost the health of its low-income residents. This complex, on Third Avenue between East 181st and East 182nd streets, embraces those same goals.

"It's not simply that St. Barnabas is trying to design a hospital wing in a patient-friendly way," said Michael Sparer, chair of the health policy and management department at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. "They are building prevention into the housing design, which is impressive."

Financing from New York state's Homes and Community Renewal includes \$71.7 million in fixed-rate, tax-exempt bonds and a mortgage loan, low-income-housing tax credits and \$7.5 million in Medicaid Redesign Team funds. New York City's Housing Preservation and Development Department is providing \$36.8 million in a low-interest, 30-year loan. The Bronx Borough President's office has given the project a \$1 million loan.

The developers and SBH plan to pack the project with features that address illnesses such as asthma, heart disease and diabetes. Interior green walls with living plants, trees and other plantings will serve as natural filters, in addition to the buildings' air filtration systems, said Spencer Orkus, a development director at L+M. The developers plan to use paint that breaks down chemical pollutants, Mr. Orkus said.

A rooftop farm will provide produce for the teaching kitchen. And a weekly farmers market will bring fresh produce to residents. Construction is expected to be completed in late 2018.

“We really looked at what are all of the major illnesses the Bronx is facing and what we could do to help create a wellness project as a whole,” Mr. Orkus said.

SBH’s 57,000-square-foot medical space in the two-tower building on the north site will house ambulatory care, pediatric and women’s health centers.

The complex will provide 95 apartments for formerly homeless families and individuals. Fifty of those units will be part of a supportive-housing component managed by BronxWorks, providing services, including case management, employment training and counseling.

The project offers an effective model with a setting for both social and medical services for formerly homeless residents, who often have many special needs, said James Rubin, commissioner of the state’s Homes and Community Renewal agency.

Retail tenants, which won’t be allowed to sell tobacco or alcohol, also play a role in the project’s mission. Developers are in talks with James Izzo, the former owner of a family-run market on Arthur Avenue, to create a cafe with healthful, affordable food. They plan to bring in a child-care center offering extended hours.

Whether the project can deliver on all of its goals, remains to be seen, but Dr. Perlstein is hopeful the project can transform the area.

“People are waiting to see what happens,” he said.

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