

The Palm Beach Post

NEW APARTMENTS AFFORDABLE TO FARMWORKERS

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April 30, 2005

FORT PIERCE. A 9-acre tract on South 25th Street, once home to some 100 dilapidated trailers, has a new life with 104 brand-new apartments, a clubhouse, pool, playgrounds and other amenities. Both the new Live Oak Villas and the former ABC Mobile Home Park, which was condemned by the city, cater to the same people - farmworkers and others in need of affordable housing. But ABC Mobile Home Park's dilapidated housing featured exposed wiring, sewage leaks and other violations that led city and state inspectors to condemn it in 1997.

Live Oak Villas provides clean, safe, carpeted apartments with modern appliances and ceiling fans. And true to its name, native live oak trees provide shade over the new landscape's sod and flower beds. The community also has playgrounds for the toddlers and computers, a gymnasium and a pool for older kids.

"People's concepts of affordable, workforce housing floats out the window when they see projects like this," said Orlando Cabrera, executive director of Florida Housing Finance Corp. "There were agricultural workers in the trailer park, and we've put this land back into use for that community."

Rent for agricultural workers ranges from \$324 for a one-bedroom to \$469 a month for a four-bedroom apartment. Non-farmworkers may pay \$521 for a one-bedroom or \$773 for a four-bedroom apartment, all depending on the family's income. The four-bedroom apartments' rent could be \$1,300 a month in a project that didn't benefit from Florida Housing Finance Corp.'s tax credits and other assistance, officials said.

Work on the project has been under way for two years, but went into high gear after last year's hurricanes damaged so many houses. Eighty percent of the apartments have been leased, and the rest will be as soon as the last two buildings are ready for occupancy. "People cry and they hug you when they see their new apartment," manager Christina Berrio said. "They can't believe it after living some of the places they've lived."

The project was built by Pinnacle Housing Group and Everglades Community Association, a nonprofit housing corporation which specializes in providing affordable housing. "Affordable housing is our love," said Louis Wolfson III, chairman of Pinnacle Housing Group. "You can change a neighborhood, a city and a state by giving hope to people." Officials hope the low rent will allow residents to save money for a down payment to buy their own house later.