

Miami Herald

FARM WORKER HOUSING HAS THE FEEL OF A SMALL CITY

PASCALE ETHEART Herald Staff Writer

August 17, 1997

Less than two years after the Everglades Community Association began a 500-unit project to house farm workers, 240 homes have been completed, 135 families have moved in, and bids on the project's second phase are expected to go out next month. Everglades Villages, south of Florida City on the way to Everglades National Park, is designed like a group of small neighborhoods, said Robert Chisholm, project architect.

The recent completion of a community room for meetings and parties, warehouse space to store maintenance equipment and administrative offices for the Everglades Community Association add to the feel of a small city with its own services and government. To ensure that sense of community, Chisholm insisted on including a central area that will have a small store, a credit union, a restaurant and some branch offices for social service agencies. It's part of the second phase. "As any entity, you have to have a central point of common ground for the community," he said. The project already has a health clinic, two day-care facilities and small parks with playgrounds.

Houses are built with large windows to reduce the need for air conditioning; they are designed to look slightly different from one another and are surrounded with lots of trees to provide shade. "Our homes aren't rich in an economic sense, but look rich in an aesthetic sense," said Steve Kirk, executive director of the Everglades Community Association. The \$36-million endeavor, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Housing Service, is replacing hundreds of trailers used to house farmworker families prior to and even after Hurricane Andrew.

Lydia Miranda, her husband Tony Gene Alvarado Jr. and their three children moved into Everglades Villages a few months ago, after having spent years in a trailer at a private mobile home park in Princeton. Miranda, who picks vegetables because she likes the flexible hours, said her family feels much safer with their current home than they did in the trailer. "We love it," she said. "We're not able to afford a home at this point in our lives. This is like the closest that we could get to one."

Maurice Victor, a case worker with the Coalition of Florida Farmworker Organizations has referred some of his clients to the development. He could refer more, he said, if they were U.S. citizens or legal residents -- requirements of living in Everglades Villages. "Once they go, they love it. The houses are beautiful and they don't pay a lot of money," he said. "For farmworkers it is a luxury."

Rent will be \$355 for two-bedroom units, \$395 for three-bedroom units and \$455 for four-bedroom apartments. On average, migrant workers make only \$6,000 to \$8,000 a year, compared with \$8,000 to \$12,000 for year-round laborers. Depending on their incomes, the tenants will pay only 30 percent of their monthly income for rent and can qualify for a \$480 exemption per child to help larger families get housing. A USDA rental subsidy program will pick up the remaining rent.