

Naples News

East coast community sets the example: A Miami-Dade County development is proof such projects work...

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September 12, 2009

HOMESTEAD -- Marisol Avenir has spent the past four months living in a place she calls paradise. It's a stone's throw from the Dade County prison on a road that leads to farmland once devoured by Hurricane Andrew. "In Homestead," she says, "I've lived in three different places. I'm super happy here." When Avenir comes home from her job at a nearby packing house, she doesn't worry about whether the shower will work. If her 5-year-old son, Amil, and daughter, Yael, 7, get sick, the community clinic is only a few streets away.

Tucked in the rural outskirts of Florida City, just beyond the Homestead town line, Everglades Community Association is home to Avenir and more than 400 other farmworker families. This isn't the typical farmworker housing in Florida or many other agricultural regions of the country. There are no rundown trailers, no holes in the floors, no toilets that won't work. "You don't pay too much rent," says Avenir, "and you can build your own future."

ECA, as it is known by its residents, is an affordable neighborhood with paved streets, manicured lawns and private driveways. There are two coin-operated laundries, playing fields and playgrounds for the children, and basketball courts where the teenagers can hang out. ECA is proof, its residents and housing advocates say, that migrant farmworkers can live in safe, affordable residences if the right efforts go into solving Florida's farmworker housing problems.

Steve Kirk is executive director of the ECA organization, a private-public housing administration that relies partly on federal agricultural money. Created after Hurricane Andrew wiped out the worn trailer enclave there and left more than 100 families homeless, ECA is to many a blessing for having survived Andrew. "We're basically a gated community. We don't have a crime-free community, but I think it's safer than other areas," Kirk says.

Management and six-day-a-week security keeps the neighborhood from becoming run down, with regulations strictly enforced and contracts that must be met in order for families to remain ECA residents. In return, the families get safe, clean places to live and a sense of stability that includes shuttering homes when they migrate to follow crops to Georgia or other agricultural regions.

In Immokalee in Collier County, the closest housing similar to ECA is Farmworkers Village, where farmworker families live in subsidized housing. Other types of housing around Immokalee consists mostly of privately run trailer parks.

At ECA, the single-level homes come with two, three or four bedrooms. Residents pay rent adjusted to their income. While the average subsidized family pays up to \$275 monthly, the actual rental cost is

between \$355 and \$455 per month. Under Kirk's stern hand, tenants follow rules that are aimed at keeping the streets clean and safe. Backyard mechanics can't leave junkers around, clothes lines aren't allowed and landscapers tend to lush shrubbery that envelopes each building.

The homes have hookups for washers and dryers; air-conditioning units installed by the association can be rented for \$12 per month. Kitchens come with refrigerators and stoves; cabinets and closets are ample. Sandra Alamilla, 27, is hoping to move in sometime soon. Her 8-year-old son, Alfredo, would fit right into the neighborhood, where impromptu football games start on playing fields moments after youngsters get off the afternoon school bus. For five years, Alamilla has worked in the fields of Homestead, picking vegetables during season and living in cramped worn-down apartments. She managed to get by with the help of her boyfriend, but now she's on her own. Standing outside the rental offices, Avenir explains that Alamilla wants out of the costly, rundown housing treadmill. "She pays \$550 for two rooms, and it's depressing," translates Avenir.

As the two friends talk outside the rental offices, members of the Florida Farmworker Housing Coalition are inside holding their first meeting. They aim to change the face of farmworker housing throughout the state, in places like Immokalee and Fort Pierce, Apopka and even in the older farm camps in Homestead. Coalition members include growers and grower associations, farmworker representatives, social services advocates and the politically connected. It's the first such organization in recent memory that has brought together all such facets of the farming industry.

On the glass meeting table before them, the coalition members snack on tiny tomatoes called grape tomatoes, a product of Immokalee's Six Ls farm, that are piled into red plastic bowls. Kirk, the newly elected coalition chairman, is quick to point out that the refreshments -- right down to three kinds of juices from Florida growers -- are the fruits of the Florida agriculture industry. "We don't have to reinvent the wheel here. There are some successes going on," coalition counsel Ron Davis tells the other members. The combined experience of the coalition members can be measured in decades and includes growers like Immokalee's Mike Taylor and longtime worker advocates like Tirso Moreno.

Kirk, who became involved in farmworker issues shortly after graduating college, has spent the better part of 20 years working on farmworker housing. As a hobby, he collects photographs and articles that document the country's farmworker housing history. The pictures mark a stark contrast to the neat homes within ECA, and serve as an eerie reminder of how some farmworkers still live in conditions that fall well below the poverty level. A series of black and white pictures hanging in the meeting room shows rows of pitched tents once provided by the government that were used to house migrants as they followed the nation's harvest. Another reprint of farmworker housing in Dade County taken in January 1939 shows one-room "shotgun shacks" lining a dusty pathway, standing like soldiers so close together that their tin roofs nearly touch.

Before Hurricane Andrew wiped out the 120-acre site where ECA now stands, residents like Rosario Ruiz struggled to keep their families safe in a housing park that was remarkably similar to the congested conditions of decades ago. Ruiz, the mother of six children, lived through Andrew and moved away to Washington State to find work and housing after the devastation. They moved back in 1995, when ECA finally offered the new promise of a stable life for her family. As her brood roughhouses in the street playing kickball, Ruiz sits on her sister-in-law's front porch and talks about the benefits and the drawbacks to life in ECA.

The ban on clotheslines -- an effort to maintain aesthetics -- galls her because she has such a large family and is forever washing clothes. The washers and dryers can get expensive. But rules do help, she says. "When I think about it, it's the rules that have made this a better place to live."