

Rural Voices

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**Farmworker Housing:
Turning Challenges into Successes**

RURAL NEIGHBORHOODS LEARNS WAYS TO HOUSE UNACCOMPANIED WORKERS

By Steven Kirk

Unaccompanied workers are usually faced with the “last-least” shelter in a rural community: isolated units or ones far below building code requirements that are the “least” desirable housing in a local community and the “last” to be rented.

The lowest paid, hardest working migrant workers in the nation often have no choice but to live in shoddy, temporary housing for which they pay a hefty part of their weekly earnings. In certain regions these workers are rarely families, but increasingly single men, unaccompanied by a spouse or children. Young or old, undocumented or legal residents, these individuals are the backbone of local harvests, often arriving just before peak season and staying for a few short weeks or up to several months. Unaccompanied workers are usually faced with the “last-least” shelter in a rural community: isolated units or ones far below building code requirements that are the “least” desirable housing in a local community and the “last” to be rented.

Notorious for their crime and squalid conditions, temporary labor camps – be they nondescript, box-like concrete block barracks, all too airy wood shacks, or aging mobile homes – are the historic prototype housing for crews of workers. Ownership varies from grower-controlled on-farm housing, to older leased motels on pre-interstate highways, to crew-leader-owned trailer parks or scattered detached homes.

Rules and regulations governing space requirements, fixtures and furnishings, cooking facilities, and sanitation range from tight controls to lax enforcement, from inspections by federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration officials to reviews by state and local health department staff.

In September 1992, Hurricane Andrew struck Homestead, Fla., the rural, agricultural edge of Miami, and host to fields of tropical fruit, tomatoes, squash, and beans as well as a thriving horticultural sector. In the aftermath of this emergency, Rural Neighborhoods (formerly Everglades Community Association) was pressed into service to meet at least part of the housing needs of our more than 10,000 local unaccompanied workers, challenging the way in which we had operated for more than ten years. Our belief had been simple – housing for families and single workers could not be mixed. There would be too many complaints from irate mothers upset over the romantic overtures made to their daughters by young, single workers and too much uncontrolled drinking. However, we took up the challenge, and time and experience proved our original misgivings wrong.

Past Success

Established to house agricultural employees made homeless as a result of Hurricane Andrew, Andrew Center was home to 500 families and 256 unaccompanied workers. Management of this 532-unit mobile home community served as our initial exposure – frankly, a not-so-small first experience. This complex housed eight workers to each four-bedroom mobile home, individual workers paid \$25 a week per bed, and furnishings and utilities were included. Over the ensuing decade, these mobile homes were replaced with permanent single detached homes, duplex apartments,

and townhouses using USDA Section 514/516 Farm Labor Housing funds for families.

Challenges and Strategies

The Not In My Back Yard – NIMBY – syndrome, a nasty phenomenon facing traditional affordable housing, grows to epic proportions in siting housing for unaccompanied workers. As a result, for far too many people, unaccompanied is the equivalent of being homeless. Our NIMBY battles are waged with the usual tactics, but we do add certain site and design considerations to our efforts.

First, Rural Neighborhoods selects and pays for multi-family zoning, if available. In nearly all instances, our site plans co-locate traditional family apartments and unaccompanied housing on the same parcel. Not only do we find the uses compatible, but our choice to include “singles” in our neighborhood undercuts the imagined horrors alleged by our opponents. Finally, our project designs include interior courtyards as critical elements. These green spaces, benches, and covered space provide unaccompanied tenants with outdoor green space that is also controlled. Unlike the image of a transient shelter with scores of men milling about the entrance, our designs provide lighted, attractive common space that is outdoors for our tenants but interior to our facility.

The choice of barracks, dormitory, or apartment style is contingent on length of stay, individual or congregate food service, living/sleeping arrangements, bathroom utilization, and furnishings. Modified apartment style is our preferred choice. It guards against functional obsolescence, converts easily to elderly or family use, and better satisfies lender concerns. In fact, the modifications to traditional apartments are few: larger bedrooms and living areas, enclosed showers separate from toilets and sinks, and prefabricated beds, tables, and storage units to meet the furnishing needs of migrant workers.

Financing considerations remain a strong barrier to increased replication of Rural Neighborhood’s model. Limitations abound: uncertain immigration status in some markets precludes broader use of certain federal financing (Section 514/516 in particular, because tenants must be citizens or legally admitted for permanent, not temporary, residence); the use of mobile homes or manufactured housing may restrict federal or state sources or trigger imposition of foundation or tie-down requirements that reduce the cost

effectiveness of these alternatives; fixtures and furnishings are sometimes not eligible expenses for funding sources such as the Federal Home Loan Bank Affordable Housing Program.

Loan and grant sources remain, however. Rural Neighborhoods has successfully used HUD’s Rural Housing and Economic Development program as a source of grant funds as well as HOME and the Community Development Block Grant monies administered at the local level. The Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta has provided equity through the Affordable Housing Program to two unaccompanied housing projects and generously considered beds as units in their cost per unit analysis. In Florida, Governor Jeb Bush has retargeted Florida Housing Finance Corporation resources to place greater emphasis on farmworker housing – and housing for unaccompanied workers is a significant result of targeting special needs.

Lessons Learned

The lessons learned have been simple:

- Unaccompanied workers were as likely to be as ‘good’ tenants as families. Our single workers were typically young, new immigrants, but typically these young men spent most hours Monday through Saturday in the fields, spent their off hours at the basketball court, and collapsed into bed much earlier than expected. Social problems were few and, frankly, far less than those of the teenage children of our families.
- Single, migrant workers were less transient than expected. The south Florida season is best described as a lengthy Halloween to Easter stay. Unaccompanied workers who were provided safe, decent, and affordable lodging stayed in the area. Except for the initial weeks of a season and the departure of those not finding field work, occupancy levels remained high until the end of season exodus. Indeed, one in five of our workers (especially those in horticulture) elected to stay year-round and provide a critical economic boost to our operating pro forma.
- Traditional full-service ‘apartments’ emerged as the preferred housing product. Barracks-style housing with shared baths and congregate feeding makes little sense in rural settings where stays exceed six months. Growers, too, have abandoned such prototypes throughout Florida, prefer-


ring to provide workers with kitchens and baths rather than stand-alone sleeping quarters. Traditional apartments are simpler to finance and more easily adapted to other tenants 10 or 20 years in the future.

- Project economics are viable and rents are perceived as fair. Well, the economics are at least as viable as those for affordable housing as a whole. Some deep subsidy or equity is a much needed ingredient. Today, our rent per bed ranges from \$30 to \$40 per week, including utilities. Tenants put up a \$100 deposit, agree to a two-week minimum stay and, thereafter, receive pro rata refunds for any mid-week move out. Monthly income for a three-bedroom apartment is \$1,040 (three bedrooms x two people x \$40 x 4.33 weeks). Reduced by 65 percent annual occupancy, the income from an apartment equates to \$675 per month. Debt and utilities are the make or break elements.

New Developments

Today, Rural Neighborhoods is constructing two state of the art communities serving unaccompanied workers. Manatee Village consists of a 128-bed structure comprised of “super

sized” two-bedroom, two and one-half bath units at a total development cost of \$1,980,000. Total space is estimated at 27,500 square feet, including leasing office, meeting rooms, and laundry facilities. Land and infrastructure costs were shared as the 20-acre campus also includes 62 duplex and townhouse family apartments. The built-out community will include an additional 30 affordable housing units for families.

Our newest project, Casa Cesar Chavez, a 144-bed structure, utilizes a different configuration. Its \$2.3 million innovative design employs four seven-unit townhouses consisting of two- and four-bedroom units facing one another to form an enclosed courtyard. Casa Cesar Chavez is one more unique undertaking and is part of Everglades Village, our \$45 million, 120-acre campus housing 2,250 residents together with three child care centers, a health clinic, neighborhood retail, and ten acres of sports fields. In the end, housing for this hard-to-serve group is an integral ingredient that our model rural village cannot be without. 

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