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CHELSEA

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'Green House' nursing care takes urban turn

By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent | September 28, 2008

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A Chelsea nonprofit is helping blaze the trail for an alternative type of nursing care through a new \$30 million facility it is erecting on Admiral's Hill.

The 100-bed Leonard Florence Center for Living, a project of the Chelsea Jewish Foundation, will be the first urban "Green House," a facility that offers a homey environment free of the institutional features of traditional nursing homes such as long corridors and nurses' stations.

Center residents will live in 10-bedroom homes, with separate bedrooms that include private bathrooms arranged around common living and dining rooms and a shared open kitchen.

"The Green House concept is a movement that takes the nursing industry as we know it today and really flips it upside down," said Barry Berman, executive director of the Chelsea Jewish Foundation, an 89-year-old senior care organization. "It takes an institutional mode of care and makes it into a very residential mode of care - yet it is still skilled nursing."

Berman said that Green Houses - which were conceived in 2003 by Harvard-trained geriatrician Dr. William Thomas - have until now been developed as freestanding buildings clustered on rural or suburban sites.

The Chelsea project takes the concept to an urban setting. Because of the land constraints of a city site, its 10 Green Houses all will be located within a single 93,000-square-foot building. But the Green Houses - two to a floor - will be fully separate, each with its own living accommodations and even a front door resembling that of a Colonial home.

"Once you are in, it's no different from any other condominium," Berman said. "They are separate households, which is so different from a typical nursing home."

The Chelsea project is also the first to set aside Green Houses for people with specific disorders. At least four of the 10 Green Houses will have a designation. To date, houses have been dedicated for people with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, multiple sclerosis, and Parkinson's disease.

Scheduled to open in November 2009, the Leonard Florence Center for Living will add to the Chelsea Jewish Foundation's growing number of facilities and programs, all of which are open to people of all faiths.

Since it was created in 1919, the foundation has operated the 123-bed Chelsea Jewish Nursing Home, on Lafayette Avenue.

Its other properties, all on its Admiral's Hill campus, are the Cohen Florence Levine Estates, a 69-unit assisted living complex; and the Florence & Chafetz Home for Specialized Care, a 36-unit assisted living facility for those with conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

The foundation also runs the Manuel Grell Home Care Agency and the Dr. Matthew Schwartz Hospice program, which began last spring.

City Manager Jay Ash said Chelsea has been very supportive of the foundation's Green House project from the start.

"The Chelsea Jewish Foundation has a long and storied history in Chelsea of providing outstanding care and being on the cutting edge of new ways to help people age with dignity," he said. "When Barry Berman approached us with the concept of bringing the first urban Green House model to Chelsea and told us what his vision was, we couldn't get on board quick enough."

Berman said the Chelsea Jewish Foundation raised \$20 million of the \$30 million project cost, covering the remaining \$10 million with a mortgage loan. The \$20 million included \$13 million in private donations, and \$7 million in federal tax credits.

The private donations included \$5 million from Dr. Miriam and Sheldon G. Adelson, after whom the foundation's campus was recently named. The Adelsons were close friends of the late Leonard Florence, a philanthropist originally from Chelsea for whom the Green House is being named.

Berman said there is considerable excitement within the Chelsea Jewish Foundation over the new venture.

"It's off the chart, our enthusiasm," he said, noting in particular the positive feedback the organization is receiving from the ALS and multiple sclerosis communities.

The University of Massachusetts at Lowell's Assistive Technology Program, in a partnership with the foundation, has designed and is providing specialized equipment that will allow the ALS residents in the new Green House to operate with a striking degree of independence within their environment.

Included are computers mounted on the resident's wheelchair. ALS residents will be able to use the computers, which respond to commands delivered through eyebrow movements, to carry out such functions as raising and lowering the thermostat, turning on the television, and going up and down the elevator.

Similar equipment also will be provided to residents in the other specialty houses.

Among those who will be residing in the new ALS house is Steven Saling, a landscape architect with ALS who now resides at the Cohen Florence Levine Estates. Saling volunteered his professional skills in designing the home.

"I would rather not have ALS, but I have never seen that worrying does any good and I choose not to waste my remaining mobile days lamenting what I no longer can do," Saling wrote on his MySpace page. "On the contrary, I accept my new challenges and take a great deal of satisfaction in adapting to my losses." ■