



## Wesley Housing Development Corporation.

Nonprofit group provides affordable housing for those in need

### At a Glance

**Location:**  
Alexandria, VA  
**Founded:**  
1974  
**Employees:**  
60

Above: Wesley Housing Development Corporation's renovated community center at Strawbridge Square Apartments. The homes will be affordable for the next 40 years.

THANKS TO THE state of the current economy, the number of working individuals and families unable to find affordable housing has skyrocketed, particularly in the tight real-estate market of Northern Virginia. To combat the trend, leading nonprofit developer Wesley Housing Development Corporation builds, preserves, and manages affordable rental housing for low- and moderate-income families, seniors, and the disabled.

"The need for affordable housing has turned critical," says president Shelley Murphy, who spent 20 years in corporate America before joining Wesley Housing in September of 2007. "Wait lists for housing vouchers from local governments can last years."

For example, in the city of Alexandria, where three of Wesley Housing's communities are located, a 2008 survey found that nearly 10,000 units had been lost since 2000, and 40% of the city's residents were in jobs with salaries that did not meet the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's threshold for living

expenses. Thus, even for working families, affordable housing is scarce.

Since 1974, Wesley Housing has acquired 23 development communities and provided over 20,000 people in six cities with stable, quality housing. Eighteen percent of its portfolio is composed of accessible units, and Wesley Housing was first in the region to provide housing for individuals with HIV and AIDS in the 1980s. They were also the first in the region to provide a barrier-free, universally designed complex for individuals with special needs, such as those with traumatic brain injuries, affording them the opportunity to live on their own in a safe environment.

The latest product of Wesley's advance housing efforts has become a new standard for local governments and other developers. Nestled in a residential neighborhood, the Ben Franklin House is a universally designed group home for residents with disabilities.

"Here, we partnered with the programs service

provider from the planning stages,” Murphy says. “That way, the specific needs of the residents were front-and-center through the entire development process. The result is a gorgeous home with fully accessible baths, kitchen, pantry, bedrooms, living areas, exercise room, and deck with container gardens.”

With 56 percent of Wesley Housing’s current portfolio consisting of two-bedroom or larger units, the firm is known for providing affordable housing for larger families in an industry that—because of dwindling financial resources and the need for an economy of scale—is marked by one-bedroom units. Several of Wesley Housing’s projects have involved reconfiguring and enlarging units rather than performing a one-to-one renovation. At Colonial Village, a historic transit-oriented community in the initial stages of being renovated and preserved for an additional 60 years, Wesley Housing is adding 33 bedrooms via bump-outs.

Strawbridge Square was Wesley Housing’s first project, completed in 1979, and recently the complex has

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**SHELLEY MURPHY, PRESIDENT**

undergone a complete renovation, preserving affordability for the next 40 years. All of the units, including rare three- and four-bedroom townhomes, have received new bathrooms, kitchens, flooring, and mechanicals.

“The community center space was doubled, and residents now have a separate computer lab for use in the resident programs and activities,” Murphy says. “Wesley Housing has long believed that a successful community is not merely ... well-built housing. If you want the community to thrive, you have to provide residents the tools and resources necessary to help build new futures for themselves.”

For example, the property manager at one community building invited a high school dropout who had just become a new mom to try the on-site computer class even though the thought of going back to school in any form was daunting to her.

“Our staff reached out to her because she is the reason we combine affordable housing with residential programs,” Murphy says. “A computer class led to a GED, which led to college. Now, this same woman, who thought her life couldn’t change, is a successful labor and delivery nurse in nearby Fairfax County and living in market-rate housing.” —*Tricia Despres*



Top: One of Wesley Housing’s universally designed kitchens in a group home for disabled adults in Fairfax County, VA. Above: The Strawbridge Square Apartments now have an additional computer lab where residents can communicate and take online courses.