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BMORE MEDIA

GEDCO GIVES GOVANS' LESS FORTUNATE A BOOST

It's been said that it only takes one person to initiate change. In Greater Govans, a community stretching the length of York Road from 33rd Street to Northern Parkway, Rev. John "Jack" Sharp is that man.

Nearly 30 years ago, after a parishioner was released from the hospital, Sharp, who was the pastor of Govans Presbyterian Church, had an epiphany: that low-income seniors were falling through the gap. His older parishioners who didn't have any family members to help care for them and couldn't afford to pay to live in retirement communities weren't being cared for.

"I went to several of our churches to see if we could raise money to build something for our seniors. I envisioned something like Charlestown, but we knew we had to start small," he recalls.

After three years of challenges and setbacks, what had been a deteriorating pre-Civil War era building located at York Road and Bellona Avenue became Epiphany House, a 33-unit residence for low-income seniors.

"We dedicated the building and thought we'd done our job. But, then some seniors who had mentally ill children came to us because they were afraid of what would happen to their children when they were gone," Sharp says.

That project, Ascension Homes, converted three single-family houses into group homes for 20 individuals with chronic mental illness. Completed in 1988, the homes offer residents the opportunity to learn to function as independently as possible in the community.

By 1991, what had been a somewhat informal group consisting of seven churches was officially incorporated as the Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation (GEDCO). Today, the non-profit is committed to tackling the complex problems facing both Govans and Baltimore City as a whole by creating affordable housing and supportive services for seniors, the formerly homeless, those with mental disabilities, the hungry, and others with emergency needs.



GEDCO has grown to include some 50 member organizations including interfaith congregations, schools, business associations, and community groups. The coalition has been responsible for opening CARES, a food pantry that also offers an employment assistance program as well as funds to area residents facing eviction, utility turn-offs, or who need prescription drugs.

There's also Harford House, a 26-unit single room occupancy permanent residence for formerly homeless men; the 40-unit Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Senior Housing at Gallagher Mansion for low-income seniors; Micah House, a 33-unit permanent resident for formerly homeless men and women; and Shelter Plus Care, which serves 25 individuals with HIV/AIDS.

GEDCO's most visible accomplishment to date, however, is Stadium Place. Located on the former Memorial Stadium site, the complex includes 340 apartments for low-income seniors, a YMCA, a community playground, and a recently completed baseball field.

"Our current focus is on the Stadium Place site because we have a commitment to the city and state to fully develop the 30-acre site. Our next project is The Green House," says Mitch Posner, GEDCO's executive director.

Scheduled to break ground in December, The Green House Residences at Stadium Place are perhaps GEDCO's most ambitious project so far. It is part of the organization's plan to create a community with a continuum of care that will meet the needs of moderate and low-income seniors as they age in a more home-like setting.

Once completed, the five-story building will house about 49 residents in need of 24-hour care. Free from stifling schedules and the trappings of a typical nursing home, The Green House will house have 12 private bedrooms, each with its own bathroom on each floor. The rooms will be built around the "hearth," a communal area that includes a living room with a fireplace and a dining area with a large table able to seat all the residents and a large open kitchen where caretakers known as "shabbazim" will make home-cooked meals at all times of the day. Each floor will also have a large porch overlooking the playground and baseball field. The building's lower level will include a large therapy room and a beauty salon.

"It's the epitome of housing with supportive services. To define what it is, it's a nursing home, but it's like no nursing you've ever seen before. It's a first of its kind long-term care facility in Maryland. It will show how you can provide long-term care housing in a very compassionate, caring, and nurturing environment," says Posner.

Once the \$12.4 million Green House is completed, GEDCO plans to start work on a "village center" at Stadium Place. With a focus on community, health, and wellness, the organization is currently in talks with medical providers to set up shop at the location that will face 33rd Street.

"There will also be a café that will be a gathering place. We need it to be something that's economically viable, but also a place where the seniors who live there, people who come from the Y and live in the community, students at the local high schools and just people who drive up and down 33rd street, people of all different ages, incomes, races, and creeds can come and get the services that they need.

A condominium complex with 140 condos will round out the Stadium Place complex. But, that's not it for GEDCO, Posner says. "We're interested in providing assistance to our community where we can, and there's a lot of need out there."