

Ribbon cutting at LGBTQ-friendly senior apartments

By Melissa Wasserman
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Center on Halsted and Heartland Alliance introduced its new LGBTQ-friendly affordable senior housing development to the community with a ribbon-cutting ceremony Oct. 10 at Town Hall Apartments, 3600 N. Halsted St.

Lakeview residents and elected officials gathered outside the old 23rd District Town Hall police station, which has been repurposed for the senior center portion of the senior residences in a new adjacent building.

Opening with a press conference, 44th Ward Ald. Tom Tunney, Center on Halsted's CEO Modesto "Tico" Valle, Heartland Housing's Executive Director Michael Goldberg, state Rep. Sara Feingenholtz, U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley, U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin, Citi Community Capital Vice President Natalie Moretz, Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) CEO Michael Merchant, Town Hall Apartments resident Eva Skye and Mayor of Chicago Rahm Emanuel spoke at the press conference.

"In four or five years, hate-crime legislation, repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, civil unions, marriage equality, housing," said Emanuel. "When Tom [Tunney] came to see me and I first got elected, I said 'what's our No. 1 goal?' He said this building. A building [Town Hall police station] that once stood as a source of pain will now be a source of pride

[because many LGBTs were arrested and processed at the station]. A building that once was a place of horror will now be a building of hope. And a building that once stood as a source of shame will now be shelter. That's a testament to the history of the United States in a short period of time. From Stonewall to this moment, I want to say this as a father of three kids; I want to thank the gay and lesbian community for reminding America of our values and reinforcing what we talk about in public what we try to teach our kids in private: tolerance, acceptance, a sense of justice. Because when you put this building up and you bring housing and you see that arc of history bent toward justice, we are a better city because of your courage and your leadership and I want to say thank you."

Town Hall Apartments residents, project supporters, friends and neighbors gathered on the sidewalk and the building's second floor terrace at 10:30 a.m. After a ribbon-cutting ceremony, residents and volunteers led property tours.

"Town Hall Apartments is a safe, welcoming and affordable place for seniors to call home in a community that embraces and supports everyone, regardless of sexual orientation," said Goldberg. "Affordable housing is critical to the success of any city. Town Hall demonstrates how good design, development and collaboration can fulfill a critical need while improving the surrounding neighborhood."

This project is the first LGBT-friendly affordable senior housing in the Midwest—opening after properties in Philadelphia and Los Angeles. The \$23.7 million, six-story, 79-unit building is home to seniors 55 or older of all sexual orientations and gender identities. All of the units are subsidized, resulting in rents no more than 30 percent of a given resident's income. The requirements to qualify residents varied, but most of the apartments are limited to people earning less than \$30,000 per year. Heartland Housing received more than 400 applications to live in Town Hall Apartments. Currently all the units are rented.

"I think this is going to be just a beehive of activity in the next coming weeks," said Goldberg.

Center on Halsted will expand and relocate its Senior Services program to the first floor of the building calling it "Center on Addison." Heartland Housing, a division of Heartland Alliance, was the lead developer for the facility and will provide on-site management. Heartland manages 14 affordable housing communities and has developed nearly 1,850 affordable homes throughout the Midwest.

"Town Hall Apartments directly addresses the disparities amongst our LGBTQ older adults," said Modesto "Tico" Valle, CEO of Center on Halsted, located right to the north of the new facility. "This generation lives in isolation and experiences housing and healthcare discrimination more frequently and proportionally than their straight counterparts. With more than 50,000 seniors who identify as LGBTQ in the Chicagoland area, Town Hall will act as a model, both locally and nationally to address these issues."

Valle added seeing the many walks of life from the community and support from elected officials at the event made for a proud day.

Don Bell was facing homelessness and a sense of isolation before moving into Town Hall Apartments. Being alone, he was not sure where he was going to go or find connection. A SAGE program participant previously living in the south suburbs, this opportunity, he said, came along and met his needs just in time.

"It was an incredibly emotional experience both as a gay man and as an African American man," said Bell, who got to help cut the ribbon. "At 65 I've seen a lot of social change in the United States and I've been a part of a lot of movements, political efforts and the fact that this dream has come to fruition just in time for me when I was at my greatest moment of need, it was absolutely incredible."

"I don't have to worry about my safety anymore," said Skye, who spoke on behalf of the residents. "I feel at home. Everyone has embraced me for being myself. Some say moving into a senior living community is the end of the line, but for me it's just the beginning."

According to Heartland Housing, Town Hall Apartments is the culmination of nearly a decade of research, advocacy and community relations. In 2005, Heartland Alliance conducted a research study of Chicago's LGBTQ senior community to determine the need for an amenity-rich LGBTQ-friendly affordable housing development. Heartland worked with local aldermen to identify a workable location, and later worked with city, state and federal agencies to identify and secure solid financing.

In 2012, the City of Chicago selected Heartland Housing and Center on Halsted to develop the former Town Hall police station site. In 2013, the Chicago City Council transferred the land over to the Center and Heartland and construction began.

"Reclaiming this site is significant for our Stonewall trailblazers," said Valle. "The Town Hall police station, once a site of fear for LGBTQ individuals, has now been given back to the community and is testament to changing times, popular opinion, and our supportive partnerships."

The new facility, completed August 2014, holds 30 studios and 49 one-bedroom apartments. The building includes 20 covered car parking spaces, and dedicated parking spaces for bicycles. Amenities include ENERGY STAR appliances, security cameras, high-speed Internet, and a laundry room on each floor. The second floor includes a common dining area, computer lab, fitness room and an outdoor terrace overlooking Halsted Street. The ground floor has 4,450 square feet of commercial space and will also house Center on Halsted's increased senior programming in a 5,500-square foot space, which is set to be completed the first week of November.

The development was designed by Gensler, a Chicago architecture and design firm.

"What we've tried to do is to make sure seniors are able live work and play in the community they grew up in," said Ald. Tunney, who helped push for this housing for more than a decade. "So, they know the shop keepers, they know the street, they're familiar and they're safe. This is the antithesis of isolation. This is integration and this is so exhilarating for me to see the dream and the reality and the fact it's in the best location in the city of Chicago. Not just Lakeview in terms of its dynamism, but the fact that it's affordable housing in the community people are familiar with and has a history and connect with the center, who can beat it? It's something that you work hard, long, stay determined, stick to the goal and you're able to really lead people by example."

"It's been an incredibly long struggle, but well worth the wait," said Goldberg. "The product is amazing, the response in the community has been outstanding and we know it provides a critical need in the community. We're just happy we could execute and bring this building to life."

The video playlist below contains multiple videos. Choose Playlist in the top left hand corner to watch videos out of order, if preferred.